

Brimstone Raising BuffyOh My Goddess!

by Skyrocket

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Summary: Urd, Skuld and Belldandy must work with the Scooby Gang to stop Mara from unleashing chaos on Sunnydale.

1. The Gathering Hellstorm

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Buffy the Vampire Slayer/Oh My Goddess!

Brimstone Rising

**

In Hell all you can do is scream. All around him he heard the damned scream and his cries mixed freely with theirs.

Although they constantly burnt his skin, it wasn't the flames that tormented him. It was the faces. The faces never stopped appearing before his eyes. His family, Drusilla, Jenny Calendar and so many more. The faces of those he'd killed and the lives he'd ruined endlessly danced before him, glaring and accusing. He shouted apologies and begged forgiveness but it never came. The only thing that ever came was more pain.

"Well, well, lookit here," cooed a female voice.

He looked up and through the flames he saw a woman approaching him. She wore pants and a jacket of black leather and a necklace of animal teeth. Her skin was tanned and a mane of dirty blonde hair flowed past her shoulders. Between her eyebrows were two angry red colored lines that looked like war paint. The marks went to the top of her forehead at a slight angle. Just under her eyes were two more red marks. These were two triangles sitting atop each other that pulled back toward her ears in such a way as to give them a vaguely tiger-like appearance.

"It looks like I've found a fallen angel," grinned the woman. "Don't worry, kid. We've got loads of fallen angels around here. You'll fit right in."

"Who?" he rasped.

"Aw, you mean you don't remember me?" asked the woman in a fake hurt voice. She then struck a cheesecake posse and grinned at the man. "I can't believe you'd forget someone as lovely as yours truly. Then again, life in the Pit isn't exactly conducive to good memory."

Another face flashed before his eyes. She had been a nurse named Margot. He'd killed her and an entire tent full of wounded Confederate soldiers in Mississippi in 1863, just after the surrender of Vicksburg. He remembered the way she had screamed as he fed on the injured men before turning on her. He remembered the way he'd laughed just before sinking his fangs into her neck.

"Another flashback?" quizzed the woman. "Must have been a bad one from the look on your face. Get used to that, slick. From the looks of things, you're going to be seeing them from now until Ragnarok."

"Who are you!?" he screamed.

"You still don't remember?" sighed the woman. "Well, I'm sure it will come to you sooner or later. Try and think about it when the faces off all those innocents you slaughtered isn't taking up your time."

The woman then turned and began to walk away. "I'll check with you again sometime and see if it has come back to you. But no hurry. If there's one thing the Damned have it's time. They don't call this 'eternal' damnation for nothing."

As she continued walking he could hear the woman's staccato laughter blister his ears. "Nya-ha-ha-ha!"

Once the laughter faded he began to scream again.

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He awoke with a jolt. It took him a moment to realize that he wasn't in Hell anymore but in his own bed.

"Just a dream. Just a dream!" Angel repeated to himself. After taking a moment to realign himself, the vampire climbed out of bed and ran a hand across his brow. Angel took a moment to be thankful that vampires didn't suffer from cold sweats.

A glance at a nearby clock told him it would be dusk soon. He hoped that a few hours on the streets of Sunnydale patrolling for other members of the undead would make him feel better. Secretly, he doubted it.

Still trying to shake off the dream Angel headed for the library of the abandoned mansion he called home. Perhaps some time lost in the words of great writers would make him feel better.

Twenty minutes later Angel had found a book of Irish poetry and doing his best to chase the dream from his mind.

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The Second Coming

**

By

William Butler Yeats

—

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

—

Angel frowned, decided not to even bother with the rest of the poem and tossed the book aside. "Thanks a lot, Yeats," he muttered. "That was just what I needed to hear right now."

Surrendering to fate, Angel turned his mind back to the dream and the woman with the marks on her face. He knew he knew her from somewhere. His time in Hell (or wherever that horrible place had been) had damaged him body and soul. Since his return to earth his body had healed, but his mind still bore many scars. Not the least of them being the lose of some fragments of his memory.

Long past the setting of the sun Angel sat, trying to recall where he knew the blonde woman from.

Then it came.

"Mara" he whispered.

And then it was gone again. Whatever he had managed to dig up from his mind had slipped away as quickly as it had come.

"Mara. Her name is Mara" Angel whispered to himself. Somehow, in his heart, he knew that name meant trouble.

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On the other side of the world, in a quite suburb of Tokyo, there sat

a small Shinto shrine. One thing made this shrine different from all the others that dotted Japan. That was the fact that this shrine was home to one very ordinary college student and three very divine beings. The student was Keiichi Morisato, lover of all things motorized and student at the nearby Nekomi Institute of Technology. The divine beings were Urd, Skuld and Belldandy, the Norse demi-goddesses of destiny.

In the living room of the house attached to the shrine a stunning woman with long platinum hair, bronze skin and three blue, triangular marks, one just above her nose and the others under her eyes, on her face was watching TV. She was watching it while floating three feet off the ground.

-click-

--continuing mission, to seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no one has gone before!"

-click-

"â€"yet another riot erupted at Tomobiki High today when its most infamous student, Ataru Moroboshi, is alleged to have--"

-click-

"â€"awoke to find himself trapped in the past, facing mirror images that were not his own. His only guide on this journey is Al, an observer from his own time who appears in the form of a hologram that only Sam can--"

-click-

"That which has never been achieved, the path to becoming one with God; the Human Instrumentality Project."

-click-

--a shadowy flight into the world of a man who does not exist."

"By the Almighty, there's nothing on!" howled Urd. Frustrated, the goddess floated to the floor and began to sulk. "We get more channels all the time and there's still never anything good on."

It was then that Keiichi stuck his head into the room. "Hey, Urd, what's all the shouting about?"

"I'm bored, that's what," muttered the goddess. "There's nothing to do around here! I'm so board I'm climbing the walls!" To illustrate her point Urd turned herself upside down and floated to the ceiling.

"Sounds like a case of cabin fever to me," said Keiichi.

"Cabin what?"

"Cabin fever. It means you've been inside or in one place too long."

"And what's the cure for cabin fever, oh wise and all-knowing Dr. Morisato?"

Keiichi grinned slightly at Urd's joke. "If you want me to tell you you'll have to come down here. Looking up at you like that is giving me a crick in my neck."

Bemused, Urd did so. "Okay, Doc, what's the prescription?"

"It's pretty simple. You just need to get out of the house for a while," prescribed the mortal man. "Go on a vacation or something."

At those words Urd's eyes lit up. "Hot damn, you're right! A vacation is just what I need!"

Keiichi took a step back nervously. Whenever Urd got this excited about something it usually meant trouble. On the other hand, a few days without Urd's interference might just give him some time to get closer to Belldandy.

"So, uh, just where is it that goddesses go on vacation?"

Urd stopped dead in the middle of the pirouette she'd been doing. "Hhhmmm, good question. We didn't get much time off back when we were maintaining the Yggdrasil System.

"Let's see, I want to go someplace where I can work on my tan. Maybe a little sightseeing and some clubbing. Oh, and booze. Wherever I go the booze has to be good. And, of course, TV. I just can't enjoy myself without TV!"

Keiichi scratched his chin and tried to think. There had to be someplace on earth that could fill all of Urd's requirements. After a few moments he snapped his fingers. "I'm no travel agent, but what about Los Angeles?" he suggested. "Plenty of sun and beaches, lots of nightlife, plus, it's the entertainment capital of the world."

"L.A., huh?" mused Urd. "Yeah, now that I think about it that does sound pretty good. It's been a while since I was in the States."

With a flash of light Urd transformed the green silken Chinese dress she had been wearing into a purple tanktop and black miniskirt. From nowhere she produced a pair of sunglasses that she slipped onto her face.

"When Belldandy and Skuld get back from the store tell 'em where I've gone and that I'll be back in a few days."

"Uh, Urd, maybe you should wait until they come back so you can talk this over with them. If something where to happ--"

Urd sighed and placed a finger on Keiichi's lips, stopping his protest. "Anyone ever tell you that you worry too much, Keiichi?" she asked. "Jeez, after I get back we're going to have to come up with a vacation for you. You certainly could use one."

Keiichi boggled.

"Anyway, nothing's going to happen," assured Urd. "Trust me." With that, she blew Keiichi a kiss and then jumped into the TV screen. In a blink she was gone.

After a moment Keiichi strolled over to the TV and turned it off. "After all this time it still amazes me when she does that," he muttered. "'Nothing's going to happen. Trust me.' Famous last words, Urd. Especially for around here."

With a resigned sigh Keiichi turned and headed for the garage. He hoped that Urd was right and that a few hours tinkering with the engine of his motorcycle would chase his worries away.

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Josh Garcia stretched and let out a long yawn. He took a swig from his can of Pepsi and returned his attention to the book he'd been reading, The Rum Diary by Hunter S. Thompson.

"Hey, Lucy, I'm home!" called a new voice.

Josh looked up to see his friend and fellow geology student, Winston Coleman, stroll into the lab, a pair of McDonalds bags in his hands.

"My apple pie had better damn well still be hot," muttered Josh as he put his book away.

"Gripe, gripe, gripe. That's all you ever do," teased Winston as he unwrapped a burger. "You really should get more sleep. All these late nights are making you irritable."

"Maybe so," grumbled Josh while shoving some fries into his mouth. "But the credit hours and experience I'm getting in here are worth it."

"Experience?! You call this experience? All we do is sit around here and watch these machines do nothing. I swear, the Seismology lab has got to be the duller place on the whole UCLA campus!"

"I like the quite," said Josh. "It gives me time to work on my thesis. Which, if I may be so bold, is what you should be doing instead of sitting around on your butt playing Pokémon on your Gameboy."

"Thanks for the advice, mom," snorted Winston.

Josh's retort was cut short by a flurry of activity from the machines in the lab. "Hey, Winston, what were you saying about this being the most boring place on campus?"

"Shut up."

Soon the two students were soon busy pouring over the computer's data. "Well, it looks like we just picked a minor shaker," concluded Josh. "From the looks of things it was just barely a 2.4. Have you located the epicenter yet?"

"I'm just getting that information now," answered Winston. "According to our readings, the center of the quake was right under some town called Sunnydale."

Josh let out a whistle. "Sunnydale? Prof. Jurgens mentioned that place in class last month."

"Yeah, I remember that," said Winston. "About sixty years ago a big one hit out there and swallowed half the town, right?"

"Right. But with a shaker this size I don't think we have to worry about that happening again. I'd say everyone out there slept through this one."

"Envy them," sighed Winston. "It may have been a small quake, but Prof. Jurgens is still going to want a full report on it. Better go make some coffee. I think we're going to be at this for a while."

Josh nodded and went off to find the coffeepot.

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"We're home!" called a cheery voice. Keiichi glanced up from the homework he'd been doing as Belldandy and Skuld, their arms loaded with packages, entered the living room.

"Hold on and I'll help you with those," called the young man as he scurried over to the two goddesses.

"Where's Urd?" demanded Skuld. "A lot of this junk is for her. The least she could do is help us carry it."

"Uh, Urd's sorta gone right now," informed Keiichi as he took a bag from each of the two.

"Gone? Gone where?" asked Belldandy as she ran a hand through her chestnut hair.

Keiichi was beginning to feel a bit worried. He knew how deeply Belldandy cared for her sisters and hoped she wouldn't be upset at him for his role in Urd's leaving.

"You see, Urd was complaining about being bored," began Keiichi. "I suggested that get a change of scenery or take a vacation or something. I was pretty much just joking."

"Go on," prodded Belldandy.

"Well, Urd loved the idea of a vacation. She started going on about how she wanted some place with sunshine and nightlife and TV. Off the top of my head I suggested Los Angeles. The next thing I know she'd changed into an outfit of the cover of Vogue and had jumped through the television."

"Good," beamed Skuld. "No Urd for a while sounds great to me."

"Skuld! That's a terrible thing to say about your sister," admonished Belldandy. "I wish Urd had waited for us to come back. A family

vacation to Los Angeles sounds wonderful."

"Actually, the impression I got was that Urd wanted to take this trip alone," supplied Keiichi.

"Aw, who cares what Urd wants?" said Skuld. "As long as she's in California she won't be around here to pick on me or boss me around."

Belldandy gave her sister another reproachful look. Skuld's face reddened and her eyes fell to the floor. "Sorry, sis," she muttered.

The older goddess nodded and headed into the kitchen. "If Urd wants some time to herself then we shall respect her wishes. Once she gets back maybe we can look into going somewhere together."

"A vacation?!" squealed Skuld in delight. "That'd be fun! Even if we had to take grumpy old Urd with us."

"It wouldn't be a family vacation if we didn't take Urd *and* Keiichi with us," called Belldandy over the sounds of her beginning to prepare dinner.

Skuld ran a hand through her raven hair and scuffed her foot on the floor in embarrassment. "Oh, of course. It wouldn't be a family trip without him. No, sir!"

"Thanks a lot, Skuld," grumbled Keiichi.

Inwardly the Japanese man sighed. When she'd first shown up Skuld had been somewhat hostile toward him, blaming him for "stealing" her beloved older sister away from the young goddess. In the months since Skuld's attitude toward him had mellowed greatly. Though he didn't openly admit it, Keiichi had begun to feel like an older brother to Skuld. This was due in no small part to the fact that the girl reminded him of Megumi, his own younger sister.

"I hope Urd will be okay," said Keiichi as he returned to his algebra homework. "America is a crazy place, and from what I hear, L.A. is the craziest place in the whole country."

"Don't worry about her," dismissed Skuld as she began to tinker with one of her ever-present mechanical devices. "Urd may be a big 'ol pain in the butt, but she can take care of herself."

On that Keiichi was forced to agree. He nodded and then turned back to his work.

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Los Angeles is a city of many landmarks. But none is more famous than the Hollywood sign that lays nestled in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains just outside the city proper. Every year thousands of tourists flock to see this icon of the entertainment industry. But tonight the sign played host to perhaps its most unusual visitor ever.

"Fly me to the moon and let me play among the stars. Let me see what spring is like on Jupiter and Mars!" sang a soft voice. Perched

atop the **D **in theHollywood sign Urd gazed down at the city with a smile.

"I always did like that song."

As the lights in the metropolis below continued to twinkle the goddess began to kick her legs back and forth like a child on a swing. "Keiichi was right. Getting out of the house was just what I needed. For the first time in a long time I don't have Belldandy or the brat looking over my shoulder. That means it's party time! Look out, L.A.! Urd is in town and she's gonna make you shake like no earthquake ever did!"

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Sunnydale, California

The next day

"I'll go with bizarre lifeform from the planet Metaluna," said Xander.

"I'll say castoff from a failed experiment at cloning the Toxic Avenger," countered Buffy.

"I'm guessing some kind of slime mold," continued Oz.

"I don't think slime molds come with little bits ofâ€¦fruit, I think that's fruit, floating in them," commented Willow. "Or maybe that's pork."

It was once again time for lunch at Sunnydale High and the Slayerettes were busy trying to discern what the latest addition the cafeteria menu, "Sunnydale Surprise," might be. So far any classification for what the sticky green substance on their trays was had proved elusive.

"I'm telling you guys, I really think the lunch lady is trying to kill us," said Xander as he began to prod the goo with a fork. Much to his surprise the fork suddenly became stuck.

"The sad thing is that in this town that's actually a possibility," mused Oz.

"Can we please talk about something besides homicidal faculty members?" sighed Buffy. "Stuff like that reminds me of the time Coach Marin tried to feed me to the swim team."

"New topics are good," agreed Willow. "Say, did you hear about the earthquake last night? It's supposed to have hit right under town."

"There was a quake last night?" asked Xander as he continued to struggle with the Sunnydale Surprise. "So how come I'm stuck in this academic prison instead of digging myself out from under the rubble of my house? Which, upon reflection, sounds like a lot more fun than the geometry class I have next period."

"Oh, it was just a little quake," informed Willow. "A 2.4, I think. That's like baby size when it comes to earthquakes."

"I hope it's just a normal quake and not some nasty gross monster belching," said Buffy.

"This is California, birthplace of all your favorite natural disasters," shrugged Oz. "You can't start thinking that every bad thing that happens in this town is because of the Hellmouth."

"He's right," nodded Xander who was still trying to liberate his fork from his lunch. "This could just as easily have been the underground mole people testing their secret earthquake machine before they launch their attack on the surface world."

The others stared at Xander.

"What? After vampires, zombies, androids, fishmen, killer eggs and mummies are underground mole people so hard to believe?"

"Xander, you really need to spend less time down at the comic book store," teased Buffy.

"I say thee nay!" retorted Xander. "Mock not my comics or I shall smite thee with mine hammer, mighty Mjolnir!"

This time the whole cafeteria turned to give Xander a quizzical look.. The young man's face turned red and he suddenly became intensely focused on his plate.

On the far side of the room Cordelia Chase rolled her eyes. "Why did I ever allow that geek within sight of me? I must have been possessed!"

Back at the table of the Scooby Gang Buffy and Willow tried not to laugh but failed. Oz, as always, remained unflappable.

"Tis some foul plot by mine evil brother Loki to bedevil me," grumbled Xander.

"I guess you guys are right," said Buffy. "There's no point in worrying about the quake now. If it was just Mom Nature working out a kink then no big. But if it was some monster or mole people or whatever, they'll show up sooner or later. And if they do I'll do my slayage thing and afterward we can all go out for cheese fries."

"The classic formula," grinned Willow. "Sounds good."

It was then that the bell rang and rang and the presence of academia returned.

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Los Angeles, California

One hour later

"Blood, sweat, tears, fear, loathing, urine and smog. Smells like humanity."

The author of those words stretched and then went back to leaning

against a wall in one of L.A.'s more dingy bus stations. Her name was Mara and she was a demon first class, unlimited. As a general rule, demons are rarely in a good mode. Unless they're up to something evil that is. And while Mara was up to no good (she wasn't a first class, unlimited for nothing) it was doing little to improve her mood.

"Damn goddesses," Mara grumbled. "Damn Urd most of all! Thanks to her my plans for the Lord of Terror are dust. And to make things worst I'm in deep with my bosses back in Niflheim. I'm lucky they didn't cast me into Helheim after that fiasco. Not even the Gods can return from there.

"Even so, I can't believe I've been busted down to this. Doing Faustian deals and tempting mortals to sin. This is rookie stuff! I should be back in Japan coming up with ways to the goddesses and that wimpy mortal they're shackled up with miserable!"

Mara stopped her ranting for a moment to spit on the floor. Due to the spell she'd weaved around herself none of the humans in the area noticed. To them she was simply not there. "I guess I should be grateful I got assigned to Los Angeles for the duration of my 'probation'. There're plenty of people in this burg who're glad to sell their souls for a little taste of fame. And with all the greed, lust and vanity already floating around, getting mortals to sin is a snap. This job may suck, but at least it isn't too demanding."

"Bus 17 from Glendale now arriving," blared the PA system.

"Ah, fresh meat," grinned Mara. "Folks new in town are always ripe for plucking." Still grinning the demon headed for the passenger unloading area.

Mara leaned against a column and watched the passengers get off, looking for any easy prey. Third off was tall red haired kid who sported a purple shirt and blue shorts. "Hhhmmm, that one looks promising. At that age mortal males have more hormones than brains. A little push in the right direction and this boy could start some serious trouble. My favorite kind."

"Zack! Yo, Zack!"

Mara turned to see a chubby blond boy running up to the first kid.

"Hey, Wally," greeted Zack. "Thanks for coming to pick me up."

"No problem," said Wally. "But I was sure surprised when you called. Aren't classes still going on back at your college?"

"My former college you mean. I dropped out and there is no way I'm going back. In fact, I never want to set foot within ten miles of UC Sunnydale again."

Mara's ears suddenly perked up. "Hhhmmm, Sunnydale. Now there's a name I haven't heard in a long time!"

"Why'd you drop out?" asked Wally. "I hear UCS isn't a bad school."

"Wally, you're my cousin so please take my advice on this," implored Zack. "Stay as far away from Sunnydale as you can. That town is just bad news. People disappearing all the time, weird murders and all kinds of other creepy stuff happen constantly there."

"I'm telling you, I have no idea what my mom and dad were thinking when we moved out there two years ago. 'Lower crime rate' my ass! South Central on a Saturday night is safer than Sunnydale at high noon on a Sunday."

"Take a pill or something," grumbled Wally. "It couldn't be all that bad."

"Remind me to tell you just how many kids at Sunnydale High died while I was going there last year," snorted Zack. "And to think I hoped all that weird stuff might be over when I graduated."

"It didn't?"

Zack shook his head. "My roommate back at UCS disappeared after about a week of classes. He left a note saying college was too much for him, but he didn't go home."

"So what? College can get to people. So the guy just took some time off for himself."

Again Zack shook his head. "That's what I thought at first. But his parents came by hoping I might have an idea of where he might be. When I showed them the note he left behind they said it wasn't his handwriting. That really freaked the hell out of me."

"So that's why you dropped out and decided to try and enroll in UCLA?"

"Yeah, anywhere is better than Sunnydale."

"If you say so," shrugged Wally. He and Zack then grabbed the redhead's bags and headed into the terminal.

"Heh, sounds like Sunnydale hasn't changed a bit," grinned Mara. "I wonder..." With a contemplative look on her face Mara vanished.

In the terminal Wally and Zack looked at the space the demon had just occupied and then gave each other knowing glances.

"It looks like she took the bait," assessed Wally.

"So it seems," said Zack. "The first part of the plan is a success. The boss is going to be pleased."

Wally and Zack's eyes briefly flared crimson before they too disappeared.

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Sunnydale High

"Hey, Giles, you here?" called Buffy as she pushed open the doors of the school library.

Giles, seated at the checkout desk, looked up from the papers he'd been reading. "Right here, Buffy. Was there something you wanted?"

"Nothing in particular," began the Slayer. "But I've been having a case of the creppies ever since I heard about the earthquake last night. I was hoping you could do your patented Giles look-stuff-up thing and see if anything with tentacles and an attitude is due to pop out of the Hellmouth this week."

"I could recheck the Pergamum Codex, but none of my research has turned up any indication that we're due for any major supernatural activity," said the Englishman as he sipped from his ever-present cup of tea. "Also, we've seen no unusual activity among the local vampire population for weeks. At this point I'm willing to say that the earthquake was a totally natural occurrence."

"So it was just SoCal doing the shimmy shimmy shake and not Pumpkinhead getting ready to pop out of Hell?"

Giles had no idea what Buffy had just said and decided not to ask. "Erâ€|no. I'm quite sure it was just an earth tremor."

"Coolness," grinned Buffy. "So what's that you're reading? The latest issue of English Librarian Quarterly?"

"That doesn't arrive until next month," replied Giles as he moved the papers to allow Buffy a better look. "I'm just looking over some reports from the Watchers Council. It seems that there was a rash of strange happenings just after that meteor shower a few weeks ago."

"Meteor shower? Please don't tell me I'm going to have to start worrying about being replaced by a pod person every time I go to sleep."

Giles momentarily considered a witty rejoinder but quickly decided it wasn't worth the effort. "No, no pod people. Just some very odd phenomena, most of it centered in Japan for some reason. Skies going dark in the middle of the day, reports of a colossal wolf running about Chiba Prefecture, a great ring of light in the sky and the unexplained destruction of the Makuhari Messe Convention Center."

"A giant wolf?" said Buffy. "I thought in Japan it was supposed to be giant lizards and moths. So what's deal with all this weird?"

"The Japanese government is being rather tight-lipped about the whole affair, especially the leveling of the convention center," continued Giles. "They're blaming most of this on rare atmospheric occurrences caused by the meteor shower and mass hysteria. The Japanese branch of the Watchers has been investigating, but have yet to reach any conclusions."

Giles took another sip of tea. "It's quite a shame about the Makuhari Messe Convention Center. It was quite a lovely building the last time I saw it."

At that Buffy boggled. "You mean you've been the Land of the Midnight Sun? And when were you going to share this with the rest of the class?"

"It's the land of the Rising Sun," corrected Giles, automatically.
"The Land of the Midnight Sun is Norway. But yes, I've been to Japan before. I studied there for six months as part of my Watcher's training. I never brought it up before becauseâ€¦well, I don't like to discuss my past. Plus, it has never been relevant to anything we've had to deal with.

Buffy mentally kicked herself. She knew that his past was a sore spot for her Watcher. _Smooth, girl. Real smooth._

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Giles was again taking a drink of tea. "Marvelous country Japan. Delightful people and lovely tea. Did you know that in the traditional Japanese tea ceremony--"

"Uh, I've got, like, an avalanche of homework tonight," interrupted Buffy. "Thanks for the 411, Giles. See you tomorrow."

With that, the Slayer beat a hasty retreat from the library.

Once Buffy was gone Giles allowed himself a small grin. "Nothing scares an American teenager more than being given the chance to learn something." Still smiling, the Englishman again reached for his tea.

~*~*~*~*~

A site seen by every tourist to the City of Angels, the Capital Records Building is one of the most famous skyscrapers in the Los Angeles skyline. Sitting on top of this landmark, a laptop in front of her, Mara was reading.

"Well, there's no shortage of information about Sunnydale up on the DEMONet," mused Mara as her figures danced across the keyboard. "I wonder what's been going on there since my last visit."

For the next ninety minutes the blonde demon sat, reading though all the information on the vampire-plagued town. Once she was done Mara stood, stretched and began to pace. "From the looks of things, life in good 'ol Sunnyhell has gotten a lot more interesting in the last few years. Due in no small part to the arrival of the Slayer."

Mara stopped her pacing for a moment to look back at her laptop, which currently had a picture of Buffy on the screen. "Hhhmmm, she's prettier than the last one. Tough too from the looks of things. She managed to somehow kill the Judge. Last time he was loose it took an army to stop him. This one got the Master as well. Shame about that. He was one of the few vampires I had any respect for. Hell, this little bottle of peroxide with legs even offed Machida, Eyghon, Moloch and quite few other big name demons. I'll give her credit, she's good."

"Good, but not perfect," grinned Mara as she continued to pace. "Under her watch the Hellmouth has been opened a number times. True, in each of those instances it was only for a very short time, but that's not important. What matters is each time the Hellmouth was opened it poured more of the power of Hell into this plane. That makes Sunnydale the perfect place to cast all sorts of fun spells if

you want to give them an extra kick. Ideal for the little party I've been thinking of throwing."

Mara stopped pacing and pulled a large black book from under her jacket. On the cover, written in a language that no human could pronounce, were the words _The Big Pop-Up Book of Apocalyptic Magick_.

"Mom always did give me the best presents when I was a kid," chuckled Mara.

But the demon's laughter was cut short by a sudden urgent beeping from the laptop. With a growl of annoyance Mara trotted over to see what was going on.

She studied the screen for a few seconds and what she saw did not make the demon happy. "There's a divine being in Los Angeles?! The Powers That Be in Heaven couldn't be onto me already. Damn! This could ruin every--" Mara stopped as the computer suddenly brought up some more information.

"I don't believe it," muttered the demon. "I know that energy signature. It's Urd! But what in the Nine Worlds is she doing in L.A.?"

Now feeling a bit nervous Mara again began to pace. "Could the Powers That Be in Heaven know what I'm planning and have sent Urd to stop me?" she wondered. Mara then stopped in her tracks and threw her head back in a deep laugh.

"What was I thinking? Of course the Powers That Be didn't send Urd! If they knew what I was planning they'd have sent someone *competent* to stop me!"

Slowly, a grin began to spread over Mara's face. "Hhhmmm, now that I think about it, this could be a stroke of good luck. Ever since they cost me the Lord of Terror I've been itching to get back at those damn goddesses and now fortune has dropped one of them right into my lap.

Mara grin kept getting bigger. "Oh yeah," she sneered. "This is going to be to perfect. Watch your ass, Urd! Mara's got herself a plan!"

With a final blast of staccato laughter Mara and her computer vanished.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

While separate from Los Angeles proper, the city of Santa Monica is still forever linked with LA. This small but famous city is a treasure throve of condos, trendy eateries and one very famous stretch of beach.

Josh Garcia hoped he wasn't blushing. It wasn't as if a woman had never blown him off before. Not that he was bad with women. No, of course not. He'd had a number of girlfriends over the years and was still on good terms with most of them. Josh Garcia wasn't bad with women at all. It's just than no one can hit a home run every time they step up to the plate. At least that's what he told

himself.

"Oh, crash and burn," chuckled Winston Coleman from his position on a large beach towel.

"Shut up," growled Josh as he sat down and looked out at the Pacific Ocean.

"Touchy."

"Cork it. I don't know how I let you talk me into coming to the beach. I should be back at school going over those earthquake reports with Prof. Jurgens."

"All work and no play makes Josh a grouchy boy," said Winston. "Look man, if it makes you feel any better I saw that woman shoot down five other guys before you tried your luck."

Josh turned his head to have another look at the woman who had rebuffed him. She was tall, had a long mane of platinum hair, bronze skin, and a curvaceous body set off in every way but the yellow two piece she wore. Much to the envy of just about every other woman on Santa Monica Beach.

"I guess that one was just out of my league," Josh.

"You and me both, buddy," agreed Winston as he stood and brushed some sand from his bathingsuit. "Come on, there's a shop nearby that sells really tasty ice-cream and I'm buying."

"Sounds good to me."

With that, the two set off in search of solace and sprinkles.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

Nearby, laying in a tanning chair only a few feet from the Santa Monica Pier, the object of Josh's failed advances watched the two wonder off.

"Oh yeah, I've still got it," grinned Urd as she took a drink from the margarita in her hand. "Not that there was ever any doubt. But it's nice to know I can still make men drool."

Enjoying the sensation of the margarita flowing past her lips, Urd adjusted her sunglasses and shifted her position in the chair a bit. "Ah, now this is just what I needed. I'll have to do something nice for Keiichi when I get back home. Maybe one of my special love potions for him and Belldandy. As a surprise, of course â€|"

Still in a state of utter contentment, Urd reached down beside her chair and turned on the small portable radio that lay there. Instantly, a woman's voice and twangy guitar filled the air.

—

I'm a bitch

I'm a lover

I'm a child

I'm a mother

I'm a sinner

I'm a saint

I do not feel ashamed

I'm your hell

I'm you dream

I'm nothing in between

You know you wouldn't want it any other way

—

Urd grinned and raised her margarita into the air in a mock toast.
"Sing it, sister!"

—

I'm a bitch

I'm a tease

I'm a goddess on my knees

When you're hurt

When you suffer

I'm your angel undercover

I've been numb

I'm revived

Can't say I'm not alive

You know I wouldn't want it ANY other way

—

As the guitar began to fade there was but one thought on Urd's mind;
It doesn't get any better than this.

— **

-SPLASH-

**

"WHAT THE HELL!?! " howled the goddess as she felt something icy splash on her. As she whipped off her sunglasses and looked down at her torso Urd saw that she was covered with sticky, slushy red ice.

"A Slurpy?! Who in Hell would have the guts to dump a Slurpy on ME?!"

"That would be me, I'm afraid," called a voice.

Urd looked up to see Mara, sporting a black bikini, looking down on her from the railing of the pier. She also noticed the empty Slurpy cup in the demon's hand.

"I'm so sorry about that, Urd," apologized Mara in a sickeningly sweet voice. "Can you ever forgive me?"

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Unaware of the two higher being within their midst the people visiting the Santa Monica Pier continued on with there lives. A sand sculptor pondered which color to use next in his latest work, a tourist from Oklahoma paid ten dollars to have his photo taken next to a cardboard cut-out of C-3PO, a group of kids poured quarters into the games in an arcade, someone threw the remains of a hotdog at a street mime and two German businessmen complained about how hot it was. In short, just another day in paradise.

Urd however, was too pissed to notice any of that. A bit of magick had cleared the remains of the Slurpy from her body but cleaning up had done nothing to improve the goddess's mood. "Bad enough Mara makes my life at home miserable. Now she has to ruin my vacation. This time she's gone too far!"

At this range Urd had no trouble sensing Mara's energy. Within moments she found her quarry at the very end of the pier, gazing out over the Pacific.

"Sorry about the Slurpy, Urd," cooed the demon as she turned to face the goddess. "You know me and my butter fingers."

"Cut the crap, Mara!" snapped Urd. "What the hell are you doing here?!"

"You mean you're not glad to see me?" asked Mara while faking hurt. "You wound me."

"I'll do a lot more than wound you if you don't knock it off!"

"Fine, fine," sighed Mara. "Truth is I'm here for the same reason you probably are. Just a little R&R. I have to say, I think I like this city. It's much easier to get a tan here than it is back on the Shore of Corpses back in Niflheim."

"Mara, just how dumb do you think I am?" muttered Urd. "You don't really expect me to believe you're not coming up with some plan to get back at us, especially me, for what happened with the Lord of Terror, do you?"

The blonde demon rolled her eyes. "Of course, I'm planning my revenge on you damn goddesses and your little pet mortal too. What kind of demon would I be if I wasn't? It's just that I've got bigger fish to

fry right now."

"Oh? And what kind of fish what that be?"

"Sorry, Urd-baby, but that's my secret for now," grinned the demon. "But let's just say things are starting to look real sunny for 'ol Mara."

With a final grin and burst of laughter the demon vanished leaving only the slight smell of brimstone behind.

"Dammit," cursed Urd as she turned to look out at the sea. "I know that smile. Mara only smiles like that when she's up to something REALLY nasty. But what am I going to do about it?"

The goddess stood there for a long time, gazing out at the Pacific Ocean and thinking. Eventually, she reached a conclusion.

"I need a drink."

With that, Urd also vanished.

~*~*~*~*~*~

The disappearance of the demon and the goddess went totally unnoticed by everyone on the pier. Everyone but two young men who were far more than they seemed.

"Well, now isn't this interesting?" commented Wally as he munched on a corndog.

"That's hardly the word I'd use," said Zack after taking a drink from his can of Diet Sprite. "Thanks to that damn Mara, Urd and her sisters are sure to stick their noses into this. The last thing we want is for the three Norns to know what we're planning. This could ruin everything the boss has been planning for."

"You're so negative," sighed Wally. "The boss has been planning this for ages. It's going to take a lot more than the Norns and a Slayer to stop the plan."

"My, aren't we confident?"

"Yes, I'm confident! The boss hasn't steered us wrong yet. Besides, once the plan succeeds Mara and the Norns will be easily destroyed. The Slayer even easier. I'm telling you, the boss's plan can't fail."

Zack was silent for a long moment. "I suppose you're right. After everything the boss has been through, the interference of three demi-goddesses and one Slayer can't count for much. Still, we'd better let the boss know about this. Who knows? Maybe this little wrinkle can be turned to our advantage."

Wally simply nodded. The pair's eyes again glowed red and they too vanished.

~*~*~*~*~*~

It was another night in Sunnydale. For most people that meant curling

up in front of the TV, reading, or some other relaxing activity. For Buffy and Angel it meant taking on a half dozen vampires with a punk rock fetish in one of the city's many graveyards.

"I'll eat your eyes!" one vamp with a yellow mohawk and a ripped _Sex Pistols_ T-shirt shouted.

"May I just say eeewww..." retorted Buffy as she nailed the creature with a kick to the gut. "Oh, and FYI, Sid Vicious, the whole _Mad Max_ look is WAY out of style."

"You'll paying for joining up with the Slayer, you ugly sonnova bitch!" shouted a vamp with piercings all over his face as he charged Angel.

"Ugly? Says the guy who's been making out the a tackle box," quipped Angel as he caught his attacker by the arm, flipped him to the ground and staked him. Behind him Angel heard the telltale sound of another vampire being destroyed. Angel smiled.

A few minutes later there were five less vampires in the world.

"Hey, weren't there six suckfaces when this fight started?" asked Buffy as she scanned the graveyard.

Angel nodded. "There was a girl with these five. She must have slipped away

when her friends started to eat wood."

"Which puts her a whole ten IQ points above all the other vampires in Sunnydale. Uh, present company excluded, of course."

"Thanks. Now that we're done here maybe we should head to Rice Field Cemetery. I was there yesterday and saw some evidence that someone may have been skulking around."

"As much fun as trolling for skulkers sounds, can I talk to you for a second?"

Angel wasn't sure he was comfortable with the tone of Buffy's voice but he bade her to continue.

"First off, I guess I should thank you for going on patrol with me tonight," began the Slayer. "I know you've been dealing with...stuff since you, uh, came back. But tonight you seem kinda...distracted. Is everything okay?"

Angel avoided Buffy's gaze. Damn that girl could be perceptive. "Bad dreams. That's all," muttered the vampire.

"I thought I was the one with the exclusive on freak nasty dreams around here."

"It wasn't a dream about the future. I was dreaming about when I was...away. There was a woman who said I knew her but I can't remember..."

Angel shook his head and took a few steps away from Buffy. "On second

thought, why don't you handle Rice Field. I'll track down that stray vamp."

"It's still early. We could track her down together and then head over--"

"Actually, I'd really prefer to handle this solo," interrupted Angel. "I need some time to myself."

A pained look flashed across the Slayer's face but she tried to hide it with a quick nod.

"Thanks." Angel then turned and headed for the north gate of the cemetery. After watching him for a moment Buffy moved toward the south gate.

"Buffy?"

The Slayer turned.

"This may be nothing, but could you ask Giles to see what he can find on the name Mara. Just to be on the safe side."

"Sure."

Without another word Angel vanished into the night.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

As she ran through the streets of Sunnydale Courtney Wilkes thought back on what had just happened. Dave, Cody, Paul, Todd and Nelson were dead. Staked by the

Slayer and her pet turncoat vamp.

"Damn you, Dave. I knew that we should have stayed in Encino," spat Courtney

as she turned down a sidestreet. "I told you this was a bad idea but you wouldn't listen. 'The Hellmouth will rock!' you said. 'Don't worry about the Slayer. If she gets in our way I'll eat her eyes!' you said. I always knew you were a dumbass, Dave."

The fleeing vampire dashed down an ally and hid behind a dumpster. For several minutes Courtney sat unmoving, looking for any sign of pursuit. "Guess I lost 'em," chuckled the creature as she ran a hand through her hair. Hair that was bright purple with neon green bangs.

"You may have lost the Slayer and Angel, but you've been found by us," informed a voice.

The vamp whipped around to see two men, one blond and dumpy and the other tall and with red hair standing behind her. "Oh goodie. I missed dinner," snarled female vampire as she vamped out. "Now who wants to be the entree and who wants to be dessert?"

Wally and Zack looked at each other and snickered.

"Bite me," smirked Zack.

"If you insist!" growled Courtney as she charged.

Zack merely raised his right hand and spoke a few archaic words. A streak of red energy flew from his palm and struck the vamp in the chest. Courtney fell to the ground, twitched a few times and then lay still.

"They're certainly not making vampires any smarter these days," remarked Zack.

"Couldn't we have found one with better taste?" asked Wally. "I mean, look at this freak."

"Looks aren't important here. The boss said for us to grab a female vamp and that's what we did. Besides, with what the boss has planned for her--"

"Yeah, yeah, I guess you're right," interrupted Wally. "Let's get out of here. I wanna grab some dinner."

"You're always thinking of food. No wonder you're so fat," teased Zack.

"I'm not fat! This is muscle!"

"Newsflash, chubby, muscle don't jiggle when you walk."

Wally retorted with a few choice words about his companion's mother. Zack

just smiled. In a burst of red light Wally, Zack and Courtney vanished.

Moments later Angel appeared at the mouth of the ally and looked around

fervently. "I'm positive she ran this way. This ally is a dead end so she couldn't just vanish. And what the hell was that flash?"

Angel spent several minutes going over the ally but found nothing. In frustration he cursed and delivered a brutal kick to an unlucky garbage can. Feeling a bit better Angel decided to go find a place he could be alone with his thoughts.

"I've got a bad feeling about this..."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Tokyo, Japan

There's an old saying that when the cat is away the mice will play. A similar thought was going through Skuld's mind as she plopped down in front of the TV. But it was a bit more like "While the bossy, TV-hogging older sister is away, Skuld will channel surf!"

-click-

"It's GI Joe against COBRA, the enemy, fighting to save the day! He never gives up! He's always there! Fighting for freedom over land and air!"

-click-

"Oh no! It's Lina Inverse!"

-click-

"I am Justice. I am the Night. I am Batman!"

-click-

"In the name of the Moon, I'll punish you!"

-click-

"Autobots, roll out!"

-click-

"To protect the world from devastation."

"To unite all peoples within our nation."

"To denounce the evils of truth and love."

"To extend our reach to the stars above."

-click-

"M.A.S.K. is the mighty power that can save the day! Come see the laser rays fire away!"

"I love cartoons," giggled Skuld.

It was then that the front door flew up and Urd stumbled in. "Hoist the mainsail! Batten down the hatches! Reverse the polarity of the neutron flow! Warp factor six, Mr. Sulu!" shouted the goddess.

"Urd, you're home!" yelled the young goddess in surprise. It was then that Skuld noticed that her older sister's eyes were bloodshot and swimming in and out of focus. "You home and you're not? You're totally plastered."

"Hey! I'm not as drunk as you think I am!" slurred Urd as she waved a finger in her sister's face.

"Right. And I'm a Chinese jet pilot."

"Don't sass me, Scully, er, Skuld," growled Urd. "Now where's Belldandy and Kento, uh, I mean, Kensuke, no, that's not it. Aw, hell! Where's Belldandy and the short, uptight guy we live with?"

It was that moment that Belldandy and Keiichi came in from the kitchen.

"What's all the noiseâ€œ" Oh, Urd's back," said Keiichi. "And she's smashed. I guess someone had a good time on their trip."

"Hey, I didn't go stinkin', Ah mean, drinking just for the sake of gettin' drunk!" retorted Urd blearily. "It's Mara, you know? She's up on, uh, up to something. So I'm gotta be at full power for when she shows up here."

"Mara?!" gasped Belldandy. "Oh my."

"You bet your ass 'Oh my,' sister!" proclaimed the blonde goddess. "So we'd gotta be prepared. Belldandy, go take a nap! Skuld, start scarfing ice cream and don't stop till ya freakin' burst!"

"If you say so!" beamed the youngest goddess as she dashed for the kitchen.

She made it all of three steps before Keiichi grabbed her by the collar. "Dream on, Skuld. Dream on."

"Meanie!" huffed Skuld.

"Urd, before we do anything perhaps you could tell us just what happened with Mara," said Belldandy.

It took almost an hour, and a large pot of black coffee, but eventually Urd managed to recount the story of her encounter with Mara in Los Angeles.

"Damn," cursed Keiichi. "It's only been a few weeks since that whole Lord of Terror mess and already Mara is looking to make our lives miserable again. Why the hell can't she find someone else to bother?"

"If what Urd said is right, she just may have," said Skuld.

"Even is she has it won't last long," muttered Urd who was finally able to put together coherent sentences again. "She made it pretty clear that she's going to pay us back for destroying the Lord of Terror. Pay us back big time."

"I wonder if that has something to do with why she was in Los Angeles," mused Belldandy. "After all, Southern California is quite far away from her normal territory."

"So now that we know Mara's up to something what do we do?" asked Skuld.

"I don't think we're in a position to make any decisions now," said Belldandy. She went over to where Urd sat and gently pulled the older goddess to her feet. "Once Urd has had some rest we'll talk some more and try to figure something out."

Then, ignoring her sister's half-hearted pleading, Belldandy led Urd off to her room.

"I think I'll head over to Otaki's place," said Keiichi. "Maybe I can borrow some more of those good luck charms of his to put around the house."

As Keiichi headed off to do that, Skuld went to her room. She had some thinking to do.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

"Can you smell that? Can you smell it in the air? It smells like FREEDOM!"

Willow rolled her eyes. "Calm down, Xander. We do have a full day of classes ahead. And then we're only getting out for the weekend."

Xander shook his head sadly as he and Willow strolled up the steps of Sunnydale High. "Ah, Will. Sweet, school-loving Will. You just don't get it, do you? For three, count them three, glorious nights we shall be free of this academic Bastille. Free to revel in the glory of being young! Free to let our youthful energy push us to new limits! Free to--"

"Free to hang out at the Bronze just like we do every weekend?"

"You really know how to put the brakes on a good Dennis Miller-esque rant, you know that?"

It was then that the two caught site of Buffy approaching them. "Hey, guys. What's up?"

"Xander was making a speech about how it's our sacred duty as teenagers to hang out at the Bronze. Or something," informed Willow. "It was majorly inspirational."

"That's me, Inspiration Guy," grinned Xander as he ran an imaginary comb through his hair. "Tony Robbins beware."

"Sorry to be the one to tell you this, but our usual exciting night of hanging at the Bronze is sorta off. For tonight anyway," said Buffy. "I talked to Giles and the library just got in a bunch of books on all things creepy and he needs us here tonight to help him get them organized."

"Say, did you hear that?" asked Xander. Buffy and Willow listened for a moment and then shook their heads. "That was the sound of our Friday night getting shot all to hell."

"Sorry, Xander," apologized Buffy. "This isn't my idea of a dream date either, but ya gotta do what ya gotta do."

"Yeah, yeah," muttered Xander. "I guess I can beat the Bronze's _Darkstalkers _game_ _again some other time. But what about you, Will? Aren't the Dingoes playing at the Bronze tonight?"

"They are, but I can't go," sighed Willow. "Mom thinks I've been spending too much time with Oz lately so she made me promise not to go to the Bronze tonight."

A mischievous grin then spread over Willow's face. "Of course, she never said anything about the rest of the weekend."

"Oh, plotting ways around the folks' rules," cooed Buffy. "So finally

your inner James Dean begins to show."

Willow shrugged and smiled. "My folks are going out of town this weekend. This freedom has pushed me into having a little of the naughty bad fun."

"That's my girl!" cheered Xander. "I knew sooner or later she'd go Dark Jedi on us. Why soon we'll have this little vixen staying out past curfew and not rewinding tapes before taking them back to the video store."

"Don't give the girl any ideas, Harris," growled a surly voice.

The trio turned to see Principle Snyder standing behind them. "I would appreciate it if you two deviants would stop trying to corrupt one of the few students this school can actually be proud of," said Snyder. "While I'm sure Ms. Summers is on the express route to a correctional facility and that Mr. Harris has a bright future as a switchyard hobo ahead of him, Ms. Rosenberg is another story. Of the three of you she's the only one who I'm sure will end up doing something other than sucking the very lifeblood out of this nation. As such, I would appreciate it if you two would pedal your mental poison elsewhere."

Xander was about to respond with a retort that surely would have gotten him suspended when the bell rang.

"Thanks, Principal Snyder. I think," stammered Willow as she clamped a hand over Xander's mouth. "I guess we'd better get going."

"Yeah, economics class waits for no one," added Buffy. Together they managed to drag Xander off before he could say anything.

Snyder watched them go and then shook his head in disgust. "Kids. They should all be sterilized."

~*~*~*~*~*~

Situated in the lowest level of the universe is a region of icy fogs and mists, darkness and cold. This land is called Niflheim, a word that in ancient Norse meant "house of mists". It was in this place that Mara made her home.

Now most people would expect the home of a demon to be a cave or some Gothic-style castle. Mara, however, had opted for a condo. And so it was that a condo than would fit right in on any sunny beach around the world had came to be built in Niflheim. It sat on the edge of a cliff overlooking Nastrond, the Shore of Corpses, where the massive serpent Nidhogg would routinely emerge from the sea to feed on carcasses. Off to the west one could see steam rising from the great spring Hvergelmir.

Since Mara spent a lot of her time on the Earth the place was empty most of the time. But the demon still appreciated the fact that she had a little place of her own where she could get away from the pressure of being a demon. Or, as was currently the case, grab some much-needed sleep.

Within the bedroom of Mara's house lay a coffin. While not exactly typical demon behavior, Mara preferred to sleep in coffins. Not

because of any desire to present a fearful image. There were much better (and more fun) ways to do that. Mara slept in coffins simply because she found them comfortable.

With a grunt Mara pushed open the lid of the coffin, climbed out and stretched. Still feeling a bit stiff she headed for the door, her wrist and ankle bracelets, being all that she had on at the moment, clacked as she walked. With a small crackle of demonic power Mara formed her usual black outfit around her body.

"Coffee. Need coffee," muttered the demon as she rubbed the sleep out of her eyes.

After a sufficiently large caffeine jolt Mara found her way the balcony where she began planning her next move. "Good, good," smiled the demon as she studied her laptop. "It'll take awhile to get everything set up, but when it's ready I'll be able to cast a spell that will shake the earth!"

Still smiling, Mara grabbed her computer and vanished.

Only moments after the demon had gone another figure appeared on the balcony. He wore a brown hooded robe and had chalk white skin. The man was smiling.

"So my part in this grand scheme is ended," said the man. "Go, demon. Go and revel in our own cleverness while you can. For when all is reveled you will see that you have been nothing but a puppet. And when this revelation comes to you, know that I will be rejoicing. Laughing in the knowledge that my revenge on you is complete."

A wicked grin still on his face, the pale man then vanished.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Tokyo, Japan

It was some hours later and night had fallen on the city. But cloistered in her room Skuld had failed to notice this. Instead, she sat staring at her computer screen. She'd spent the last few hours trying to figure out what Mara was up to with no success.

"Another dead end," scowled the little goddess. "According to HEAVENet, there's plenty of supernatural activity in Los Angeles, the last place we know Mara was. But none if it is really unusual for what you'd expect to see in a city that size."

Skuld hopped away from her desk and began to pace. "Okay, so maybe whatever Mara is after isn't in LA proper but someplace close by." As soon as those words left her mouth Skuld stopped dead in her tracks. "Yeah! I bet that's it! Just call me Sherlock Skuld!" Beaming with pride the goddess climbed back into her chair and began to pound at the keyboard with great fervor.

But a few minutes later that fervor had greatly died down.

"This is hopeless," sighed Skuld. "In an area like Southern California there's supernatural stuff floating around all over the place. I've got to find some way to narrow things down."

Skuld then settled her chin into her hands and began to turn Urd's story over and over again in her mind.

But let's just say things are starting to look real sunny for ol' Mara.

--

"'Sunny?' Could Mara have been giving Urd a hint as to what she was up to? Maybe as a challenge for us to try and stop her?"

Skuld shrugged. "Aw, who knows what that sleazy 'ol demon thinks. This is a longshot anyway. They don't call it 'sunny Southern California' for nothing."

The goddess then worked the computer, ordering HEAVENet to cross-reference supernatural activity in Southern California with the word 'sunny.'

"Only one entry found?" mused Skuld as the answer came up. With another shrug she clicked on the entry and began to read. As she read the little goddess's eyes got bigger and bigger. This was not good. This was very, very not good.

"Belldandy!"

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

"Damn, this thing is heavy," complained Keiichi as he struggled with the large turtle statue in his arms. "I hope this thing is as lucky as Otaki said. We've had enough unwanted visitors lately."

With a final grunt of exertion Keiichi deposited the statue by the house's front door. He then stepped inside only to be confronted with a chaotic scene. Skuld held a long computer printout in her hands and was talking at hyperspeed. Belldandy was trying to calm her younger sister down while Urd looked on in mild amusement.

"Look! Just look at this!" shouted Skuld as she shoved the printout into Belldandy's hands. "If this is where Mara is this could be really big trouble! Why didn't anyone tell me about this before?!"

A look of concern on her face, Belldandy began to look over the papers. "Oh my, Sunnydale! This could indeed be very bad."

"Sunnydale!?" squawked Urd. She then dashed over to Belldandy and began to read over her shoulder. "Crap! If Mara is in Sunnydale we could be looking at a major disaster here!"

"Will someone please tell me what the hell is in this Sunnydale place that's so damned awful?!" yelled Keiichi.

"Hell is right," muttered Skuld.

Urd shot her a look before turning to face the Japanese man. "Vampires, Keiichi. That's what's in Sunnydale. Vampires and the Hellmouth."

"Vampires?!" boggled the college student. "You don't really expect me to believe in vampires, do you, Urd?"

"You know that goddesses and demons are real," reminded Skuld. "Are vampires really that much more of a stretch?"

Keiichi was forced to concede her point.

"Perhaps an explanation is needed," suggested Belldandy. As she began her tale the goddess's face became still and her voice very low. This worried Keiichi in a way he didn't like to think about.

"This world is older than you know, Keiichi, and contrary to many mythologies, it did not begin as a paradise. For untold eons, demons walked the Earth, and made it their home, their Hell. In time, they lost their purchase on this reality, and the way was made for mortal animals. For Man. What remains of the Old Ones are vestiges: certain magicks, certain creaturesâ€|"

"Vampires," said Keiichi.

Belldandy nodded. "The last demon to leave this world fed off a human, mixing their blood. He was a human form possessedâ€|infectedâ€|by the demon's soul. He bit another and anotherâ€|and so they walk the Earth, feeding. Killing some, mixing their blood with others to make more of their kind. Waiting for the animals to die out and the Old Ones to return."

"And by Old Ones you do you mean things like the Elder Gods and all that H.P. Lovecraft stuff I had to read about in Literature class?" quizzed Keiichi.

"That's exactly what she means," informed Urd. "But Lovecraft only had a vague idea of what kind of beings live on the Other Side. If Mara were to crack open the Hellmouth Cthulhu, Azathoth, Dagon, Nyarlathotep, Shub-Niggurath, Yog-Sothoth and all their pals would come pouring out looking to party and Man would go the way of the dodo."

"Okay, so I understand vampires, but what's the Hellmouth?" asked Keiichi.

"I'll field this one," said Urd. "The dimension where a lot of the demons live, Hell, call it whatever you want, exists outside this one. The Hellmouth is the place in this realm where the barrier between the two worlds is weakest. Energy from Hell has been seeping into this world for centuries. This energy attracts vampires and all sorts of other evil beasties like moths to a flame."

"And someone built a town on top of this place?" gaped the young man.

Urd shrugged. "Go figure, huh? The place was shunned for generations by most of the local American Indian tribes. Even the Spanish conquistadors avoided the place. They called it 'boca del inferno'. Literally, 'the mouth of Hell'. The Hellmouth".

"So how come no one told me about all this Hellmouth stuff!?" demanded Skuld.

"Because you're still just a kid," teased Urd. "When you're a big girl you get to learn about this sort of stuff. Who knows, maybe in a few years we'll even tell you where babies come from. If you can handle it."

Skuld blew a raspberry as rebuttal.

"Stop it you two!" chastised Belldandy. The other two goddess knew that when she used that tone of voice, which was rarely, she meant business. "Given what we've learned I think what we must do is clear. We must go to Sunnydale and find out if Mara really is there. If she is we must stop whatever she's planning before anyone gets hurt."

"Uh, I got a question," said Keiichi in a slightly embarrassed voice. "Why don't you call the, uh, Almighty and let him know what's going on. Let him sort it out."

Urd shook her head. "No can do. We don't even know for sure if Mara is in Sunnydale. We can't go to the Almighty with just suspicions. For him to intervene we'd have to have absolute proof that we were staring down the barrel of the Apocalypse."

"Urd's right," agreed Belldandy. "For now we must handle this." She then turned and looked at Keiichi. "Of course, because of your wish I cannot leave if you don't want me to."

Keiichi had a look of worry on his face. "How do you think I feel, Belldandy? Of course I don't want you to go running off to Draculaville, USA."

Belldandy's face fell.

She then noticed Keiichi's hand on her shoulder. She glanced up to see him giving his most reassuring smile. "I don't want you to go, but I know you have to. Somebody has to stop whatever Mara's up to and I know you three are the only ones who can do it."

Belldandy leapt forward and gave Keiichi a hug. "Thank you for understanding, Keiichi. I promise to be back as soon as I can."

Keiichi hugged her back. "I know. Just be careful."

"Relax, kid," assured Urd as she flipped on the TV. "It'll take a lot more than Mara and the Hellmouth to stop the Norn sisters. Trust me, we'll pop over to Sunnydale, kick Mara's ass and be back before you realize we've gone."

Urd flashed a V for Victory sign and then jumped through the screen.

"I need water to transport myself," said Skuld. "I'll just use the bathtub. See you soon, sis." The littlest goddess then gave the pair a reproachful look before heading off.

"Are you sure letting Skuld go with you is a good idea?" asked Keiichi. "The Hellmouth sounds like a dangerous place. Maybe she should stay here with me."

"That thought crossed my mind as well," admitted Belldandy. "But we couldn't have destroyed the Lord of Terror without Skuld's help. I think her inventiveness may be of great help to us."

The goddess then gave Keiichi one last smile before floating into the air. "Goodbye, Keiichi." She then flew into a mirror mounted on a nearby wall and was gone.

"Bye, Bell-chan."

Keiichi looked around the house, suddenly aware of just how quite it was and just how alone he was. Urd and Belldandy's stories flashed back to him and he shuddered.

"First thing tomorrow I'm going to buy some crucifixes. And some garlic. Definitely some garlic."

Keiichi Morisato got very little sleep that night.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

"It's times like this when I wish I'd become a grocer," sighed Giles as he wiped the sweat from his forehead. The Englishmen stretched and collapsed unceremoniously into a chair.

When he'd learned the school would be getting a new shipment of books, some school related but most from the Watcher's Counsel, he'd been very excited. But when ten very heavy boxes showed up at the school loading dock his excitement had considerably dimmed. Single-handedly moving the boxes to the library had taken all morning and a nasty toll on Giles' back. Right now a rest was most definitely in order.

"Either that new stuff arrived or a bookmobile exploded in here," joked a youthful voice.

Giles looked up to see Buffy glancing around the library with mild interest. "Ah, Buffy. Come to help an old man with his books, have you?"

"Sorry, Giles, no time. I just came to let you know that Xander and Willow will be coming by to help out this evening. Oz has some stuff going on at the Bronze tonight, but said he'd try and duck out early. I'll be by after I do a quick patrol."

"Very good," nodded the Watcher. "Do tell the others I appreciate this. Under normal circumstances I'd handle this myself. But Principle Snyder has made it rather clear than he wants all these books on the shelves by Monday and there are so many booksâ€¦"

"It's cool," shrugged Buffy. "So what did the Oprah's Book Club send us this month? I take it we're not talking about Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys stuff here."

"Quite. The Watcher's Council has been surprisingly generous this time. They've sent us some very rare tomes including _The Tragedies of Jusenkyo_."

"Didn't they make us read that in English Lit. last

year?"

"Doubtful," sighed Giles. "There are only seven known copies in the whole world. You see, in the Bayankala Mountain range of China's Qinghai Province, in the shadow of Mt. Quanjing, there is a place called Jusenkyo. My Mandarin is rather rusty but I believe it means 'Training Ground of Accursed Springs' or something similar.

"There are hundreds of springs at Jusenkyo and there is a tragic story of someone or something drowning in them associated with most of them. _Tragedies_ contains the story of what happened at each spring. Including the most famous story, the one involving the Spring of the Drowned Girl."

"Cursed springs? Very Steven King," mused Buffy.

Giles ignored her. He was in his element now. "We've also gotten _Legends of the Yoroiden_ which is about nine magical suits of armor. _Great Magicks of Other Worlds_ is a guide to some the astonishingly powers spells used in realms outside our own. It contains a rather lengthy section on the mythological 'Dragon Slave'. That is a spell so powerful that it's said to be able to level whole cities with just one casting. It's also said that the spell's most famous caster, Lina Inver--"

"As fascinating as all this is, I've got to go," interrupted Buffy. "It's pizza day in the cafeteria and if I don't get back soon Xander will declare my slice abandoned and eat it."

"Sorry," muttered Giles as he cleared his throat. "I'll see you tonight then."

"Check." Buffy then turned to go.

That was when the ground began to shake.

~*~*~*~*~

Not far away, in Sunnydale's Weatherly Park, three goddess were on the hunt. To help them blend in the goddesses had traded in the clothes they'd wore in Japan for something more in tune the local culture. Urd now sported a white tanktop and denim cut-offs. Belldandy had chosen a red shirt and a pair of clam diggers. Skuld had opted for a T-shirt that read "Planet Hollywood Tokyo" and some cargo shorts.

"Boy, look at this place," said Urd as she looked around. "Your typical All-American suburb. SUVs, yuppies, kids, coffeehouses, mailmen and strip malls. Kinda hard to believe people who're living at the gates of Hell could go around acting so normal."

"Things may seem normal on the surface, but Sunnydale is more than it seems," answered Belldandy. "I can feel the current of evil that flows though this town. Perhaps the people that live here know that something is amiss but don't want to admit it."

"Yeah, I feel it too," nodded Urd. "Sunnydale is quite the little Village of the Damned, n'est-ce pas?"

"So now that we're here how do we find Mara?" inquired Skuld. "I

don't like this place. It makes my skin feel all crawly."

"That's the Hellmouth, kiddo. If it makes you feel any better it's doing the same thing to me," informed Urd. "As for how we find Mara, all we can really do is poke around and look for anything unusual."

"That's it!?! " howled Skuld. "That's your plan?! Just walk around until we stumble across Mara!?"

"It's not like that, you brat!" snapped Urd. "I know Mara. Trust me, if she's in this town it won't be long before she does something that says 'Mara is here!' in great big letters."

"Stop it, the both of you," interrupted Belldandy. "While it's not what I'd want, Urd's right. If she is in Sunnydale it won't be long before Mara does something to make herself known to us. Until then we must keep our eyes open and be patient."

"She'd never pass up a chance to do something rotten to us," added Urd.

"But isn't there some way we could track where she is?" asked Skuld.

Belldandy shook her head. "Under normal circumstances if I was within a certain range I'd be able to sense Mara's energy waves. But now we're practically on top of the Hellmouth. All the demonic energy around here is interfering with my senses. Now I'd have to be almost on top of her for me to sense Mara."

"This sucks," pouted Skuld.

"Buck up, small fry," said Urd. "I'm sure Mara will do something we can trace to her before long."

Then the ground began to shake.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Sunnydale High

Cordelia smiled as she looked into the mirror of the girl's bathroom. Eyeshadow-perfect. Hair-perfect. Lipstick-hhhmmm. That could use a touchup. Cordelia retrieved the appropriate tube from her purse and began to apply it with expert precision.

Then the ground began to shake.

Startled, Cordelia's hand slipped leaving a clown-like streak of lipstick running along the right side of her face. The fashion maven saw this and gave a brief squawk of outrage before taking shelter under the sink.

"This is all Buffy's fault," grouched Cordelia. "I don't know how, but I'm sure somehow this is all Buffy's fault."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

"I'm telling you Yogi would win," insisted Xander. "He is smarter

than the average bear after all."

Oz shook his head. "I'm still going to stick with Magilla Gorilla. Gorillas are really strong. Just look at what King Kong did to New York. Plus, he fought Godzilla. No bear ever fought Godzilla."

Xander gave an exasperated sigh. "Will, you're IQ Girl. Settle this for us. Who would win in a fight between Magilla Gorilla and Yogi Bear?"

Willow, caught with a mouthful of pizza, looked startled. She chewed, swallowed and then scratched head. "Uh, well, I was always partial to Huckleberry Hound myself. But--"

Then the ground began to shake.

With speed found only in native Californians the trio ducked under the cafeteria table. "What did I tell you? Underground mole people and their earthquake machines," said Xander.

Oz and Willow ignored him. They were too busy holding hands.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

In the dark of the mansion Angel sat trying to read. He was having little success. The vampire had woken up with a deep sense of foreboding that he'd yet to shake. Pushing those dark thoughts to the back of his mind Angel again began to read.

"_Hell is empty, and all the devils are here." _

--

The vampire sighed and tossed the copy of Shakespeare's _The Tempest_ aside. "You're not helping either, William. Maybe I should switch to Dave Barry."

Then the ground began to shake.

Angel was surprised, but with inhuman speed he dashed to the safety of a nearby doorway. In general he rarely worried about natural disasters. But the mansion was old and he didn't relish the idea of an instant suntan if the roof were to cave in.

Then, as quickly as it came, the quake was over. A quick glance at the ceiling satisfied Angel that the roof was still intact. He then returned to his chair. "A bad feeling. Definitely a bad feelingâ€|" the vampire muttered.

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"That was fun," muttered Urd once the ground had stopped shaking.

"You got a weird idea of fun, lady," said a new voice. The goddess turned to see a Hispanic man in a jogging suit standing behind them.

"That's the second quake to hit Sunnydale in the last few days," continued the man. "I don't know about you, but I hate the damn things. It's crap like this that makes me wish I'd never left New Jersey."

A worried look danced across Belldandy's face. "You mean there've been other earthquakes around here recently?"

The man gave her an odd look and then nodded. "You must be new in town. Yeah, another shaker hit around 2:00 a.m. the other night. But it was so small it didn't even wake my wife and I up."

The jogger then glanced at his watch and made an annoyed sound. "It's been nice chatting, but I've really got to be going. You ladies have a nice day. But watch yourselves after dark. There are a lot or weirdoes in this town and they all seem to come out at night." The man then gave a friendly nod and jogged off.

"I bet that guy doesn't have any idea just how weird some of Sunnydale's 'weirdoes' are," snickered Urd.

"True," nodded Belldandy. "But the fact that there've been more quakes like the one that just happened worries me. Something about that quake feltâ€|unnatural."

"Yeah, I felt it too," concurred Urd. "Something is rotten in Denmark. Or Sunnydale as the case may be."

"Do you think Mara caused the quake?" inquired Skuld.

"I don't believe so," answered Belldandy. "Causing earthquakes would push even a first class, unlimited demon to their limits. Even a spell to make a small quake like this would be extremely difficult to cast and cost Mara massive amounts of energy. Then she'd have to rest for a very long time to her strength back. This just doesn't seem like something Mara would do."

"She could do it if she was granting a mortal a wish," noted Urd. "Then she'd have the power of Hell behind her. But I can't see anyone using a wish for a little tremble like that. Plus, Mara's never been big in the wish granting department."

"So if the earthquake wasn't natural, and Mara didn't cause it, who did?" asked Skuld.

Urd shrugged. "Just toss that on the pile of mysteries we have to solve."

"Perhaps if we split up we could scour the city more quickly," suggested Belldandy.

"The 'ol _Scooby Doo_ 'Let's spilt up, gang!' deal?" grinned Urd. "Sounds good to me. Heck, once this is all over we'll probably find out that the bad guy is the mean old man who runs the amusement park."

"I don't believe Sunnydale has an amusement park."

"You really need to watch more TV, Belldandy. Anyway, I'll take the east part of town and you two take the west. We can all met back here

around 8:00."

Belldandy nodded. "Eight then. Be careful, Urd."

The eldest Norn grinned and flashed the V sign. "Relax, little sister. It takes more than a measly Hellmouth to beat Urd, goddess of the Past."

With that, Urd vanished.

"Come, Skuld," said Belldandy. "We have much to do."

"The game is afoot!" proclaimed the little goddess as the two set off.

~*~*~*~*~

"Its moments like that that make me oh so glad in live in California," grumbled Giles once things had settled down. The Watcher then cast his gaze around the library to inspect the damage. The shelves had miraculously not fallen over, but many books now littered the floor. Giles was also fairly sure he'd heard his favorite teacup crash to the ground.

"Well, it seems I have even more work to done now," sighed the Watcher as he turned to look at Buffy. To his great surprise she was standing absolutely still and her face seemed slightly pale. "Buffy, are you alright?"

The Englishman's words brought the Slayer back to reality. "Oh, uh, yeah. I'm fine."

Giles felt the worry in his stomach raising. "Buffy, please, I've been your Watcher and your friend to long not to know when something is distressing you. You're old enough to know that hiding whatever is wrong will only make it worse. Please, tell me what's bothering you."

For a moment Buffy considered continuing to assure Giles that nothing was wrong. But she realized the truth of the older man's words. Hiding it really would only make things worse.

"It's just that these earthquakes are freaking me out a bit," began the Slayer. "Yeah, I'm a born David Lee Roth California girl, but quakes in Sunnydale aren't the same as the ones in LA."

Giles brow knitted in confusion. "I'm afraid I don't follow."

Buffy gave her Watcher an inscrutable look. "The last time a earthquake hit Sunnydale, before the other night I mean, Iâ€¦died."

Giles mentally kicked himself. "Of course, when the Master rose." Buffy nodded. "So this would explain that case of the 'creepies' you mentioned the other night?" Buffy again nodded.

Giles adopted his most fatherly voice and placed a comforting hand on the Slayer's shoulder. In some back part of his mind the Watcher reprimanded himself for not picking up on his charge's feelings sooner. All her strength, courage and training sometimes made it far

to easy to forget that, at heart, Buffy was still a seventeen-year-old girl.

"Brave heart, Buffy," said Giles. "I can certainly understand why these quakes would unsettle you, but you're the strongest person I've ever met. I know you won't let whatever fear you may have control you."

Buffy managed a weak smile. "I'm really the strongest person you've ever met? I don't feel all that strong right now."

"Yes, you are," assured Giles. "You've shown enough heart and courage for two Slayers. It is because of you that the forces of Darkness have not claimed our world. Since becoming the Slayer you've faced more challenges than anyone could have ever guessed and you've always come out stronger for it. I'm very proud of you, Buffy."

Buffy's smile grew stronger. "Thanks, Giles. With pep talks like that you should be coaching the Lakers."

"And give up the glamorous lifestyle of a librarian? Never."

It was then that the school PA blared to life. "Attention students and faculty, this is Principle Snyder. As should be glaringly obvious we've just been through a small earthquake. Don't think for one second this is going to get any of you out of class. Anyone caught trying to skip out will be suspended. That is all, maggots."

"Aw, he called us maggots," sighed Buffy. "He really does care."

Giles made his favorite puzzled expression. "Unless there's been a major change in the English language that I have not been made aware of, 'maggots' is usually considered an insult."

The blonde girl gave a small laugh. "I guess you must have missed the last student assembly. Principle Snyder referred to us as 'Generation Feces'. For him 'maggots' is almost a term of endearment."

The Watcher chose not to say anything.

"Well, I think my hour is up," said Buffy as she turned to leave. "See you tonight."

"Till tonight then," replied Giles.

He watched Buffy until she had vanished out the doors. In spite of himself Giles felt a bit of fatherly pride rise his chest. He then sighed and turned his attention to cleaning up the library.

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Several hours later the world had turned and night now cast its shadow over Sunnydale. In Weatherly Park Belldandy sat on a bench waiting patiently. A few feet away Skuld was pacing angrily.

"It's ten past eight already," grouched the young goddess. "Where the heck is Urd?!"

"I'm sure she'll be here any moment," Belldandy said.

Skuld made a rude noise. "Yeah, right. She probably found a bar and is--"

"Oh yea of little faith," called a voice. The two sisters looked up to see Urd strolling toward them. "Show a little trust in your big sister, will ya, Skuld. I may not be a good little solider like Belldandy, but I do have a sense of responsibility."

Skuld rolled her eyes. "Really? Since when?"

"Listen, brat! I'll have you know--"

"Don't you two start again," ordered Belldandy firmly. The other goddesses, sufficiently chastised, stopped. "We don't have time for this sort of foolishness. Urd, did you find anything?"

Urd shook her head. "I thought I was onto something when I found an abandoned factory on the outskirts of town that was giving off some bad vibes. I checked it out but the place was deserted. I'd say some of the local vamps must have used it as a base for a while. Other than that I got nothing."

"We didn't come up with anything either," reported Skuld. "Now what?"

"I've been thinking about that," began Urd. She then pulled a pocket TV from behind her back and tossed it to Skuld.

The young goddess gave it a dubious look. "What's this for? Now isn't the time to be watching TV!"

Urd gave an exasperated sigh. "It's not for watching TV. It's so that I can find my way back to wherever you are."

"You're leaving us? To go where?" asked Belldandy.

"It seems to me Mara's keeping a lower profile than normal," said Urd. "So just sitting around waiting for her to show herself isn't going to work. While I was poking around town I remembered an old acquaintance of mine. He's pretty in tune with the netherworld's grapevine. If anyone would know what Mara's up to it's him."

Belldandy looked unhappy but nodded. "If you're speaking of who I'm thinking about then you may be right. I may not care for him personally, but he does keep himself very well informed."

"Who? Who? Who are you talking about!?" squealed Skuld. "Will one of you tell me who you're talking about?"

"No," informed Urd sharply. She then reached over and turned on the TV in her sister's hand. "You two watch yourselves. It's night now and that means that every thing that goes bump in Sunnydale will be out looking for trouble."

"We'll be all fine," assured Belldandy. "Just watch yourself."

Urd gave the middle Norn a salute and then dived into the TV. Once

she was gone Skuld snapped the device off and stuffed it into her pocket.

"Who's Urd going to see? What does he know about Mara? Why don't you like him?" inquired the goddess of the Future.

Skuld wasn't sure but she thought for a moment she saw Belldandy bristle. "I would really rather not speak of it. Let's just say that the last time the man Urd is going to see and I met things becameâ€|unpleasant."

It took all of Skuld's self-control not to boggle. She'd always thought that Belldandy got along with everyone. Everyone but Mara, that is. Though still burning with curiosity Skuld decided not to push the matter.

"So now what?"

"Now I believe we fight," replied the older goddess as she cast her gaze behind Skuld. The little goddess whipped around to see a gang of seven vampires emerge from behind some trees and surround them.

"Looks like someone forget to tell these girls that it's not safe in the park at night," joked a vamp in a camouflage jacket that seemed to be in charge. The others laughed at their leader's joke.

A hard look made its way to Belldandy's face. "Obscene creatures," she muttered. "Leave us or be destroyed!"

This brought another round of laughter from the vampires. "What are you going to do, little lady?" snickered the leader. "I don't think you've got any wooden stakes stashed in that outfit of yours."

"Then I guess it's a good thing I brought plenty for all of you," called a new voice.

Everyone looked to see a short blonde girl, a stake in each hand, standing atop a bench a few feet behind them.

"Who the hell are you?" snarled one of the creatures.

The girl rolled her eyes. "You mean you creeps haven't heard of me by now? I must fire my publicist. Anyway, I'm Buffy, your friendly neighborhood vampire Slayer."

At those Belldandy's eyebrows raised in surprise. "Slayer?"

The head vampire was clearly not impressed. "You two, get the bimbo with the toothpicks," he ordered. "The rest of you can have the brunette. I want the little one."

At their leader's behest two of the vamps charged Buffy and were quickly engaged in combat. Four others moved to separate Belldandy from Skuld and began to move in. The leader made a lunge for Skuld but she ducked out of his grasp.

Only feet away Buffy drove and elbow into the nose of one of her attackers. He stumbled back cursing while the other one charged her. The Slayer pivoted and with lightning speed slammed a stake into the

vampire's heart turning him to dust.

"She is the one," murmured Belldandy.

"Hey, sister, pay attention while we're killing you!" snapped one of the vamps.

The goddess gave a small sigh. She then held her hands a few inches apart and began to chant.

—

O, Light of Heaven

Power from Above

Gather in my Hand

to Destroy this Evil!

—

A ball of light quickly formed between Belldandy's hands.

"How the hell--" began one of the vamps assigned to attack her.

The goddess then launched the ball of light at the creatures, impacting one of them in the chest. Instantly blazing white energy raced through the monster's body and for a moment his skeleton could be seen. The vamp didn't even have time for a scream before he was destroyed. Then the energy jumped into the bodies of the other members of the undead wiping them out in the same fashion.

Seconds before Buffy had managed to dust the other vampire that had attacked her. This left her free to witness Belldandy's magick. "Wow, a vampire zapper. Cool," mused the Slayer.

Meanwhile, the lead vampire had stopped trying to grab Skuld and was now contemplating the fact that he was all alone. He hastily reached the conclusion that he was in a lot of trouble.

"Hey, ugly, did you forget about me?"

The vamp turned to see Skuld leaping at him, her lucky croquet mallet now in hand. Before the creature could respond the little goddess brought the mallet down on his head with satisfying **CRACK**!

The vampire's eyes bugged out so far Buffy thought for a moment they were going to pop out of his head. "Ouch," squeaked the creature before he turned to dust.

Buffy boggled.

"Very good, Skuld," applauded Belldandy. "You handled that vampire just like it was a Yggdrasil bug."

Skuld beamed with pride.

"Uh, excuse me," interrupted Buffy. "But would you mind if I asked who you are and how you wasted those vamps. With a croquet mallet no

less."

"It's a magick croquet mallet!" huffed Skuld.

"Be nice, Skuld," reprimanded Belldandy. The goddess then turned to face the Slayer. "I know this may be a bit hard to accept, but my sister and I are goddesses."

Buffy gave the other woman a quizzical look.

"Goddessesâ€|right."

"We are so goddesses!" insisted Skuld. "I'm Skuld, goddess second class, limited."

"And I am Belldandy, goddess first class, unlimited," said Belldandy.

Buffy hesitated, unsure of what to do. The women's story about being goddesses seemed totally outlandish. But she'd seen Belldandy work what was clearly some very powerful magick and the girl had destroyed a vampire using only a mallet. Whoever these women were, they were powerful.

"You're right, this whole 'goddess' thing is pretty hard to buy," said Buffy. "I don't supposed you've got some ID or something do you?"

"We do have licenses, but they're not the sort you carry around," informed Belldandy. The goddess then slowly lifted off the ground and didn't stop until she was floating ten feet above the Slayer. "Is this proof enough?"

Buffy started at the woman in the sky above her tried very hard not to boggle. Since becoming the Slayer she'd seen many strange things but this had to be on of the strangest. "Well, it's a good start. Would you mind coming down and telling me what you're doing in Sunnydale."

"Of course," answered Belldandy. She then gently floated to the ground and landed gently beside the blonde girl.

"Isn't my big sister just the coolest?" grinned Skuld.

Buffy gave the girl a polite smile.

"As I said, my Skuld and I are goddesses," began Belldandy. "We came to Sunnydale with our other sister, Urd, looking for Mara, a demon we've had trouble with in the past. We have reason to believe that Mara is in Sunnydale coming up with some plan to get revenge on us. Since this town lies atop the Hellmouth, we're worried that she might accidentally unleash some evil force she may not be able to control. Thus putting this city and possibly the world at risk."

Belldandy's eyes focused squarely on Buffy. "But you know about things like this, don't you? About demons and the Hellmouth. You're the Slayer, aren't you?"

Buffy was taken aback. Stories about the Hellmouth and Slayers weren't common knowledge among people who didn't move in supernatural circles.

The Slayer gazed intently into the eyes of the woman before her who claimed to be a goddess. Over the years Buffy had stared into the eyes of more vampires and demons than should could count. In the eyes of each one she had seen evil. She saw none of that in the eyes of Belldandy. In those eyes she saw only goodness and ancient power.

Some instinct deep inside told Buffy to trust the self-proclaimed goddess.

"Yes, I'm the Slayer. But you can just call me Buffy."

"Pleased to met you, Buffy. As I said, I'm Belldandy and this is my sister, Skuld."

"A pleasure to met you," greeted Skuld as she performed a passable curtsy.

"So you said this demon you looking for is named Mara?" inquired Buffy. In the back of her mind she recalled the conversation she'd had with Angel the night before. He'd mentioned the name Mara then. Now two women claiming to be goddesses had turned up also mentioning the name Mara. This was starting to look bad.

"Yes, Mara's her name," answered Belldandy. "We've been looking for any sign that she may be in town, but have had no luck. Urd left us just a few minutes ago to talk to a contact of hers who may be able to help."

"I've got a contact or two of my own. He's no Deep Throat, but Giles is the king of looking stuff up. If anyone can help you figure out what Mara's up to it's him."

"This Giles, is he your Watcher?"

"Yeah, but how did you kn--" Buffy trailed off as realization hit her. "Oh, right. If you know about Slayers then you'd know about the Watchers too."

Belldandy simply nodded.

"Slayers and now Watchers. Will someone tell me what's going on?" demanded Skuld.

"We will later, I promise," assured Belldandy. "Right now I think it would be best if we were to speak with this Giles person as soon as possible."

"Good thing for you I was just on my way to see him," said Buffy. "Just follow the yellow brick Slayer."

As the trio headed over a though crossed Skuld's mind. _I'm sure Mara was hinting at coming to Sunnydale. But where is she and what's she up to?_

~*~*~*~*~

While Buffy and the goddesses were battling vampires, the object of their search was only moments away from making her grand

entrance.

At the Bronze Oz sat in the converted storeroom that served as the "dressing room" for the club's acts. A few days before a club owner from Los Angelus had called saying he'd heard good things about Dingoes Ate My Baby. Explaining that he would be passing through Sunnydale on business Friday the owner asked if it would be possible to see the band perform. Since the Dingoes were on good terms with the owners of the Bronze they'd managed to secure use of the club for a few hours before it opened. The other members of the band were now in the main club area grabbing a quick dinner. Oz, who had already eaten, had opted for a little alone time in the cramped dressing room.

After making himself as comfortable as he could in a folding chair, Oz opened his backpack, grabbed his Discman and began to root through the half dozen or so CDs in his pack. After a few moments he selected one. "_Black Sabbath's Greatest Hits_". Gotta love the classics."

Oz removed the CD from its case and was about to place it in the player when suddenly the CD seemed to jump from his hand. The disk flew a few feet through the air, stopped, turned itself mirror-side up and then began to float.

Oz's eyebrows arched but remained calm. "My CD has gone UFO. Wild."

It was then that a hand shot up from the CD. Oz was startled and fell out of his chair. "Wild" was beginning to look like a major understatement.

While the teenager watched a woman with dirty blonde hair, a necklace of animal teeth, a black leather outfit and red marks on her face emerged from the CD. In his time in Sunnydale Oz had seen a lot of strange things and managed to keep his cool. But everyone has their limits. Oz outright boggled.

Mara looked at Oz.

Oz looked at Mara.

"Boo!" said Mara.

Oz flinched.

Mara snickered, lowered herself to the ground, grabbed the CD she'd emerged from out of the air and looked at it. "Nice choice," complimented the demon. "Looks like those self-righteous religious groups were actually on to something when they called this stuff 'devil music'." Mara then crushed the CD to pieces.

"Who are you?" fumbled Oz, worried that he might end up with the same fate as his CD.

"Name's Mara, kid. Demon first class, unlimited." Mara suddenly got a puzzled look on her and she squinted at Oz for a moment.

"Hey, kid, you're a werewolf, aren't you?"

Oz managed a nod.

A smile appeared on Mara's face. "Good 'ol Sunnyhell. The place hasn't changed a bit." The demon then brought a hand to her mouth and blew the werewolf a kiss. "See ya around, Fido. Mara's got herself some business to take care of."

In a flash Mara was gone, leaving only the faint smell of brimstone behind her.

Oz pulled himself to his feet and ran a hand through his hair. It was orange this week. "Whoa. I gotta call Buffy."

Just then a voice from the club called out. "Oz! Yo, Oz! Get yer ass out here! It's showtime!"

Oz cursed. The club owner and the rest of the Dingoes were waiting. With a sigh the teen realized there was no getting out of this. As he grabbed his guitar Oz hoped that the audition would be short. And that his delay in telling the others about Mara wouldn't be a costly one.

~*~*~*~*~*

New York City, New York

On maps of Manhattan you'll find it listed as West Mid-Town. But the residents of the area have for decades given it the colorful moniker of Hell's Kitchen. Due the high crime, poverty and drug trade in the area many people feel the name was well chosen.

Located in this section of the city is a bar with the rather odd name of Soma. The residents of the area do not drink here. In fact, if you were to ask them they'd say that they'd never so much as seen anyone go inside. Upon further questioning one might learn that the bar had been there as long as anyone could remember and, for reasons they couldn't explain, no one even knew anyone who had ever been inside.

This is by design. Or more accurately magick. For Soma is a place that caters to magicians, witches, occultists and beings that are not human. In the City That Never Sleeps it is a place where those who move in shadows and speak in tongues long forgotten can go, relax, have a beer, watch some baseball and swap spells.

"Meanwhile, at the Hall of Justiceâ€¦" blared the TV.

The screen filled with static for a moment and then Urd floated out. The goddess landed and cast her gaze around Soma's barroom. To her surprise the place was empty except for two men sitting in a corner quietly talking. Both had failed to notice her arrival.

The first man was clad in a dirty sportcoat and a battered fedora. The other man sported a normal shirt and slacks and a tan jacket that looked reasonably clean.

"So I say to Aries 'Aries, man, just put down the ax and we can talk about this.' But Aries, what with being a God of War and all, he ain't having none of it. So he swings the ax at me and damn near takes off my head. But he swung just a little too hard and gets a bit off balance. So I run around and nail him in the back with a couple

of kidney punches! Boom! Boom! Boom!"

The other man nodded politely, clearly not believing a word of it.

The first man continued on oblivious to the arrival of Urd and his drinking companion's disbelief. "So I just nailed Aries with three kidney punches, right. Well, just like that guy folds like a cheap card table. Heh, some freakin' God of War, huh?"

Urd began to clap. "Bravo! Great story. It would be even better if it wasn't a steaming pile of crap."

The two men looked up to see the goddess striding over to their table and taking a seat. "You're one to talk, Urd," said the first man as he took a puff off his cigarette. "That story was just as true as some of the tall tales I've heard you tell."

Urd gave the man an amused smile. "You haven't changed a bit, Whistler."

Whistler shrugged. "I'm like Coke. A winning formula you just don't mess with."

"You've always seemed more like Billy Beer to me but whatever," said Urd. She then looked at the other man at the table. Urd took mild satisfaction in the fact that the man was trying to look at her cleavage without being obvious about it. "So, Whistler, who's your friend?"

"The name's Doyle," introduced the man in a noticeable Irish brogue. "It's me great pleasure to make your acquaintance, Ms. Urd."

"Just Urd is fine. Well, it's nice to know that Whistler knows at least one person with some social ski--" Urd trailed and stared at Doyle. Something about him was making her senses prickly.

"The answer to your question is that he's half human and half demon," informed a voice with a English accent.

Urd turned to see a man with dirty blond hair in a worn trenchcoat strolling out of the men's room. He was somewhere in his mid to late thirties, sported black slacks, a white shirt and black tie under his coat. "Hello, Urd. It's been a while," greeted the man as he lit a cigarette in a well-practiced fashion.

Urd shook her head, bemused. "John Constantine. Why am I not surprised to see you here?"

Constantine smiled slightly as he took his seat. "I'm like a bad penny that way. Always turning up where you least expect."

"So what brings you to the Big Apple?"

"I could ask the same of you," replied John.

"Business," sighed Urd. "Or more accurately, Mara."

"Mara? What's she up to now?" asked Whistler as he took a swig from his beer.

"Nothing good, I can tell you that," muttered John. "That Mara's a nasty one."

"No kidding," nodded Urd. "I've got reason to think she might be in Sunnydale."

John made a sour face. "Shite! Sunnydale? That's the town on top of the Hellmouth, innit?"

"That's the place," confirmed Whistler. "Mara in Sunnydale. Damn, that's a disaster just waiting to happen. You got any idea what she's up to?"

Urd shook her head. "Not a clue. Actually, I was hoping you'd heard something. You always seem to have your ears pressed against all the right keyholes."

Whistler took another puff from his cigarette. "Sorry, but the last thing I heard about Mara was that she was in hip-deep with her bosses back in Niflheim over that Lord of Terror escapade. How you dealing with that, by the way?"

The goddess hesitated for a second. "I'm dealing. Not the best experience of my life but I'll get over it." Urd then looked at Doyle. "Hey, Irish, you've been awful quite. You know anything about Mara?"

Doyle seemed taken aback for a moment then shook his head. "Sorry, no. I try to avoid demons like that as best I can."

Urd then turned her attention to Constantine. "What about you, John? Seen any weird signs on the 'ol Synchronicity Highway?"

The Englishman also shook his head. "'Fraid not, luv. Believe me, I wish I did know somethin'. I still owe that demon bitch some payback from the last time I got dragged into one of her messes."

"Dammit!" cursed Urd as she slammed her fist into the table. "Mara's still several steps ahead of us. Belldandy isn't going to like this."

Whistler shifted in his seat and looked uncomfortable. "Uh, so how is your sister? I haven't seen her in a while."

Urd gave Whistler a withering look. "Still plenty pissed at you if that's what you're asking. Even if she won't admit it."

At that Doyle arched his eyebrows. "Oh? I've heard a story or two about Belldandy in my time. She's supposed to be one of the sweetest beings alive. What could our boy here do to make such a kind lass mad?"

"None of your damn business, shamrock," glowered Whistler.

Urd grinned at the man's discomfort. "You really want to know? Well, some time back those two were at a party I was throwing and Mr. Manners here tried to feel her up."

"He tried to cop a feel off Belldandy?!" squawked Constantine. "You

perverted bastard! How could you do that to a nice little thing like her?! I ought to kick you one right in the bollocks!"

"I was drunk!" protested Whistler. "And I apologized later."

"You only said your were sorry after she knocked your sorry ass though eight dimensions," snorted Urd.

Whistler winced and rubbed his jaw. "I can still feel that punch when it rains. And it was only five dimensions."

Doyle snickered.

John, however, let out a loud and long string of laughter. "Serves you right, you bloody twat. Still, it's a bit hard to picture a nice girl like Belldandy doin' somethin' like that. Even to a arse like him."

"Don't sell her sort," warned Whistler. "An iron fist in a velvet glove. That's Belldandy all right."

"True," concurred Urd as she stood. "John, Whistler, it's been fun seeing you again. Nice to meet you Doyle. But I've gotta get back to Sunnydale. The Almighty only knows what trouble Belldandy and Skuld have gotten themselves into without their wise and beautiful older sister to watch out for them."

The three men called out some good-byes as Urd head back to the TV. Just as she was about to dive in the goddess stopped and turned back to the others. "Before I go, John, you never did tell me what you were doing in the States. London is your normal beat."

Constantine took a moment to light another smoke. "'S his bloody fault," said John as he pointed to Doyle. "Him there has visions. From the 'Powers That Be' he says. Shite, I've had some dealing with those same powers and I'll tell you that they're all bastards."

"Yeah, you're on the blacklist of a lot of people upstairs," nodded Urd. "So why are you helping him out?"

"Turns out the half-breed there is a friend of me old mate, Brendan Finn," replied John.

"And since any friend of Brendan's is a friend of mineâ€¦" smiled Doyle. A deadly serious look then crossed the man's face. "But jokes aside, John's helping me out because if he doesn't a whole lot of people are going to die."

"One of his visions said there's somethin' nasty brewing in Los Angeles," clarified Constantine. "It also said that I'm the only one who can put a stop to it. Since I thought it'd be a good idea to have the Powers That Be owing 'ol John a favor I agreed. 'Sides, it's been ages since I had a proper seaside holiday and LA sounds a lot better than another trip to Blackpool."

"Never dull moment for you, John," mused Urd. "You guys take care. I gotta run." With that, she dived back into the TV.

"Good luck yourself," said Whistler as he took another drink. "You

may need it."

"And just what do you mean by that?" inquired Doyle.

Whistler looked uncomfortable again. "What I told Urd wasn't a 100% true. I did hear something about Sunnydale recently. Rumor is that someone powerful and bad has something cooking out there."

Constantine narrowed his eyes. "So why didn't you tell Urd that, you turd? That could be Mara you heard about."

"Relax, Limey," snapped Whistler. "First of all, it wasn't Mara. The way I heard it was that it was someone a lot bigger than she was. And the reason I didn't say anything to Urd was that it's not a story I put a lot of stock in. You both know how demons love to BS. I hear stories about guys plotting stuff for the Hellmouth all the time. Most of the time they turn out to be nothing but crap."

"Bastard," snorted Constantine. "Let's hope it doesn't turn out to be anything. 'Cause if anything happens to those girls, especially Skuld, I'll be taking it out of your arse."

"And if something does happen with the Hellmouth, we'd best pray the Powers That Be are on Urd's side," added Doyle.

"And the Slayer," said Whistler. "Let's hope Urd has both the Powers That Be and the Slayer on her side. If she doesn't, then the world could be in for a really nasty ride."

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Sunnydale High

As promised Xander and Willow had arrived at the library and were helping Giles sort through the books. At least Willow was. Something else had grabbed Xander's attention.

"Hey, Will, remind me to stay really, really far away from this place," exclaimed Xander as he held up The Tragedies of Jusenkyo. "This Jusenkyo place sounds like something right out of the Twilight Zone. Listen to some of the weird springs at this place. Spring-of-Drowned-Panda, Spring-of-Drowned-Piglet, Spring-of-Drowned-Cat, Spring-of-Drowned-Duck, Spring-of-Drownedâ€¦|Yeti-riding-a-Bull-holding-a-Crane-and-Eel?"

"Xander, you're making that up!" accused Willow.

"I am not! Look, it says so right here."

To appease her long-time friend Willow looked. Much to her surprise the listing was just as Xander had said. "Wow, Spring-of-Drowned-Yeti-riding-a-Bull-holding-a-Crane-and-Eel. Boy, that's weird even by Sunnydale standards." Willow took the book from Xander and began to flip through it. Something about the stories of Jusenkyo seemed to draw the novice witch.

"Spring-of-Drowned-Octopus? How did an octopus get into the mountains of China? Spring-of-â€¦|" A puzzled look crossed Willow's face.

"What's an Akane?"

"Having fun are we?" asked Giles as he stepped out of his office.

The duo jumped a bit in surprise. "Sorry, Giles," apologized Willow. "But Xander found this really cool book and we got distracted."

"Can you believe it? Me actually reading a book that doesn't have Spider-Man or the X-Men on the cover," joked Xander. "This Jusenkyo place must really be magic."

Giles put on one of his mildly annoyed looks but secretly he was pleased. Anything that could get teenagers into learning was perfectly fine with him. "Looking at The Tragedies of Jusenkyo, were you? I must admit it is a rather fascinating tome. If you found that interesting, Willow, then you may want to have a look at this," said Giles as he held a small leather-bound book.

"What is it?"

"The diary of one of the last century's greatest Watchers, Makoto Hibiki. He was Japanese, but he visited the four corners of the Earth and recorded the legends of the all the places he visited."

"Quite the world traveler, huh?" asked Xander.

Giles adjusted his glasses and looked a bit uncomfortable. "Er, no. It seems that he just had a absolutely dreadful sense of direction. A common family trait as the stories go.

"Anyway, one of the most fascinating stories he ever came across was in his native country. According to Hibiki, 700 years ago a demon fell from the sky. For weeks the creature terrorized the countryside until one day a great ship shaped like a dragon appeared in the sky. Riding atop the dragon's back was a powerful samurai named Yosho. After a great battle Yosho managed to cleave three gems that were the source of the demon's power from its body. He then placed the gems in the hilt of his sword and sealed the demon in a cave. The sword then became the key to the seal. Should anyone foolishly take the sword back to the cave and break the seal the demon would then be free again."

"And knowing our luck it would head right for Sunnydale," sighed Xander.

It was then that Buffy and the goddesses came through the library doors. "Hey Giles, set a couple extra places at the table. We've got company."

As Willow looked at the two newcomers something gave her a faint prickling sensation. It was similar to the feeling she had when she was casting spells. A small feeling of unease began to creep up Willow's spine. Her magical abilities were still limited, but these two women were somehow setting them off. To do that, the young witch realized, meant that they must wield some very powerful magick.

Xander, however, had no magical abilities so he did not exactly share Willow's unease. But he had noticed that the older auburn-haired

woman was incredibly beautiful. Under normal circumstances the sight of a beautiful woman would send Xander's mind off into any number of lusty directions. He was a teenage boy after all. But for some reason that didn't happen when he looked at this woman. For some reason she just seemed too pure for such thoughts. That unnerved Xander in a way he'd never felt before.

Giles was also feeling uncomfortable. Newcomers to the circle the teens called the 'Scooby Gang' were rare. And when they did come it usually meant trouble.

"Hello, I'm Rupert Giles, the librarian here at Sunnydale High," said the Englishman as he offered his hand. Belldandy took it and shook politely. "Over there are Xander Harris and Willow Rosenberg. They're helping me organize some new books for the school. And it seems you've already met Buffy."

"You can drop the act, Giles," informed Buffy. "They know."

Giles did his best to look mystified. "Know? Know what?"

Buffy rolled her eyes. "Everything, Giles! Slayers, Watchers, vampires, the Hellmouth. Everything. And do they ever have a story to tell."

"We're goddesses," interjected Skuld, happily.

Willow, Xander, and Giles looked at the young girl as if she'd just grown an extra set of eyes.

"I know that it sounds strange but it's the truth," said Belldandy. "My name is Belldandy and this is my younger sister, Skuld. And it is as Buffy says. We're both goddesses."

The humans turned to look at Buffy. They all had a "Is she crazy?" expression on their faces.

"Yeah, goddesses, I know how it sounds," began the Slayer. "But I saw Belldandy crispy fry four vamps and fly not twenty minutes ago. And Skuld dusted a vampire using just a croquet mallet. Guys, I'm not really sure what these two are, but I'd say goddesses is definitely on the list of possibilities."

Willow was starting to feel her initial unease die down. None of her senses, magical or otherwise, felt anything evil coming from Belldandy and Skuld. "Buffy may be right," the redhead began. "I've read a lot about goddesses and stuff and I think they're real. If they say that's what they are then maybe we should give them the benefit of the doubt."

"I know it's hard to believe but please give us a chance to prove what we say," said Belldandy.

Giles was about to demand the goddess make good on her claim when Skuld made a surprised noise. Everyone looked as the little goddess pulled the portable TV from her pocket. Its case kept bulging and raising as if something were trying to break free from within.

"Looks like someone's back from her trip," observed Skuld as she

flipped on the TV. Instantly Urd soared out of the device and stopped in the air above her sisters and the humans.

"Oh my god!" gasped Giles as he looked up at the woman floating before him.

Urd glanced at the Watcher and gave him an amused smirk. "Goddess. You mean 'Oh my goddess!'. Or goddesses if you want to get technical about it." Urd floated to the ground and gave Giles an appraising look. "Say, you look familiar. Were you ever on TV? Maybe a coffee commercial or something."

"Well, I was once an extra on an episode of _Dr. Who_ but, I, erâ€¦" fumbled Giles.

"Hey, Will, I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that these women just may be goddesses," said Xander who was still trying to get over Urd's entrance.

"I, uh, think you might be right," concurred the shaken redhead.

"Somebody give the rocket scientists a prize," grumbled the goddess of the Past as she turned her attention to her sisters. "Hey, sis. Hey, brat. Who are these guys and why are you two in what looks like a high school library?" Urd's eyes then fell on Buffy. A look of surprise appeared on the goddess's face. "Who's the blonde? Any why does she have ancient magick in her veins?"

"It's because she's the Slayer," informed Belldandy. "Her name is Buffy Summers and she's offered to help us. That man over there is Mr. Giles, her Watcher, and over there are her friends Xander and Willow."

"I told them a bit about us on the way over," added Buffy who looked slightly embarrassed.

Urd was busy giving the Scooby Gang the once-over. "So the Slayer is in Sunnydale. It would have been nice knowing that before we came here."

"I suppose we should have done a bit more research on this place before we came here," sighed Belldandy.

"Will someone please tell me what the heck Slayers and Watchers are?!" demanded Skuld.

"Yes, I think a round of explanations would be most helpful at this point," said Giles.

Belldandy nodded. "I suppose we'd best start with Slayers and Watchers. You see, Skuld, into each generation, a Slayer is born. One girl, in all the world, a Chosen One. One born with--"

"The strength and skill to hunt the vampires, to stop the spread of evil, blah, blah," interrupted Urd. "You get the gist of it. The Watchers are a secret society that has existed in one form or another since before recorded human history. They've made it their duty to help keep the monsters in this world under control. Part of that duty includes training the Slayer. The Watchers have had their main

headquarters in England for the last few centuries, but they have chapters in every country on Earth."

"And this Slayer is you?" asked Skuld as she looked at Buffy.

"Right," confirmed the blonde girl. "Well, I'm *a* Slayer. There's two of us now."

"Two Slayers? How is such a thing possible?" said Belldandy.

"Okay, long story really, really, short," began Buffy. "About two years ago I fought a really nasty vampire called the Master. He managed to put the blood drain on me, killing me. Xander andâ€|another friend of mine came along in time to give me CPR and save my life."

"But the minute or so you spent dead was enough to call the new Slayer," concluded Urd. "Wow, I've heard a lot of stories about Slayers over the years, but that's a new one on me."

"On us too," informed Buffy. A somber look then appeared on the Slayer's face "A few months after I died a girl named Kendra showed up. She was the new Slayer. But we really didn't get a chance to know her. Not long after she came to Sunnydale she was killed by a vampire named Drusilla."

"And when Kendra died a new girl was called to take her place," said Skuld. "Now I'm starting to understand."

"It's truly is a unique situation," said Giles. "The new girl, Faith, is a bit wild and something of a loner. But she's very talented. I'm sure that with the proper training she'll calm down and excel in her duties."

"'Wild,' eh? This Faith sounds like my kind of girl," mused Urd.

"Figures you'd think so, Urd," grumbled Skuld.

It was then Giles' eyes opened as if a revelation had come to him. "Excuse me, but you say her name is Urd?"

"Correct," confirmed Belldandy. "You see my sisters and I--" The goddess was cut off as Giles suddenly dashed off into the stacks. "Uh, we're the goddesses of--"

"Don't interrupt him," advised Xander. "This is what Giles lives for. Just sit back, relax and listen to the nice man's soothing voice as he explains a bunch of stuff you don't understand."

It was then that Giles reappeared, a large green book in his hands. "Urd, Skuld and Belldandy. I knew I'd heard those names before. It just took me awhile to remember where," the Watcher explained as he sat the book down on a table. He then looked at the newcomers. "You three really are goddesses. You're the Norns, aren't you?"

"B-I-N-G-O!" grinned Urd.

"Norns?" said Willow, a look of puzzlement on her face. "I think I've heard that word before."

"Okay, Giles, enough with the mystery stuff," demanded Buffy. "Will you tell those of us who didn't take Mythology 101 what a Norn is."

"Oh, yes, of course," nodded Giles as he flipped open the book. "This book is the lost volume of the Icelandic Eddas, a collection of ancient writings that provide the most authoritative source on Norse mythology known today. According to the Eddas the Norns are goddesses of destiny. They control the fates of both gods and men as well as the unchanging laws of the universe. The Norns consisted of three sisters. The eldest was called Urd or sometimes Urth. Her name meant 'fate'."

Urd smiled and gave a mock bow. "Thank you, thank you. Please, no autographs."

Giles continued unabated. "The youngest sister was Skuld whose name meant 'being'."

The little goddess said nothing but gave everyone a glowing smile.

Giles adjusted his glasses and gave Belldandy an appraising look. "The middle sister was named Verdandi. Her name meant 'necessity'."

"Wait, I thought you said your name was Belldandy," said Willow.

"Verdandi is technically my name," began the goddess. "But few people have called me that in the last three hundred years."

"May I inquire as to why?" quizzed Giles.

Urd rolled her eyes. "Looks like we get to hear the Julian story again."

Belldandy pretended not to notice. "In a nutshell the story is this. In 18th century France, in the city of Avignon, there was a young man named Julian. He was deeply in love with a girl named Lydia and she loved him as well. But their fathers were bitter business rivals who forbid their relationship.

"One day, in the midst of a horrible depression, Julian decided to visit the seaside in hopes of lifting his spirits. While he sat by the ocean he wrote a letter detailing his love for Lydia, his frustration at his father for not allowing them to be together and the emptiness he felt in his heart."

"Oh, that's so romantic," cooed Buffy.

"Sounds like the plot to some of those trashy novels they sell at the supermarket," grumbled Xander. Buffy, Willow and Urd gave him dirty looks.

Belldandy continued her story without pause. "Once his letter was done Julian put it in a bottle and cast it into the sea. As he

watched the bottle float away he prayed to any deity who may hear him to help unite he and Lydia.

"Fortunately for Julian, someone did hear his prayer. It was Alpan, goddess of love to Etruscans. She was touched by his words so she passed the letter on to the Powers That Be in Heaven. The Powers were also moved by Julian's plight and so a decision was made. Because of the love in his heart, and the fact that he had led a virtuous life, Julian would be granted one wish. I was chosen to carry out this order and grant Julian his wish.

"So I descended to the earth to grant Julian his wish." Belldandy then began to look a bit embarrassed. "After seeing me appear out of a mirror Julian had no trouble believing me to be a goddess. The problem came when I introduced myself. You see, Julian was a bit hard of hearing--"

"The guy was deaf as a post!" exclaimed Urd.

"He wasn't deaf, Urd. Just rather hard of hearing," defended Belldandy. "As I was saying, when I introduced myself Julian misheard my name. He though I said my name was Belledandy."

"Belle, spelled b-e-l-l-e, is French for beautiful," informed Skuld enthusiastically. "My big sis is really beautiful and plenty dandy!"

Belldandy gave her young sister a warm smile. "Considering how happy he was to see me I couldn't bring myself to correct Julian. He quickly wished that the hostility between the two families would end. His wish was granted and soon he and Lydia were married. They spent the rest of their lives together and were very happy."

"They even named their first daughter Belle," added Skuld.

"That's story is so sweet," sighed Willow.

"So sweet it's even givin' me cavities," muttered Urd. "Anyway, to wrap this up Belldandy comes back to Heaven and told everyone what happened. As you can see, Skuld loves this story. So she took to calling Verdandi Belledandy. Pretty soon everyone was calling her that. Over the years Belledandy somehow turned into Belldandy."

"I always took it as a term of endearment," explained Belldandy.

"Well, I think Belldandy is a fine name for a goddess," commented Willow.

"I think it suits you too," added Buffy.

"A most fascinating story," mused Giles. "But could you perhaps tell us what it is that has brought you to Sunnydale."

"We think a demon named Mara might be here," said Skuld. "Belldandy and Urd are worried that she might try opening the Hellmouth or something."

Buffy's eye's narrowed. "Mara's the name Angel mentioned to me last night."

"Who's Angel?" inquired Urd.

"That's yet another long story," replied Xander. "One I'd really rather not hear."

Giles cut off Buffy's retort to Xander. "Yes, I remember Buffy asking me to look into that name this morning. I haven't had time yet for a in-depth investigation, but if I recall correctly there may be some information on her in this book."

Urd opened her mouth to say something but Belldandy gestured to her to be quite. Urd looked as if she would argue for a moment, but then nodded.

"Ah, here it is," announced Giles after a quick search of his book. "Mara, sometimes refereed to as Mahler. A Norse demon from the realm of Niflheim. Supposedly she's very fond of cruel tricks and was a favorite deciple of the god Loki."

"Oh, Loki, I know this one!" exclaimed Xander. "He was the Norse God of Mischief. He runs around in this funky yellow and green outfit and wears a helmet with these whoppin' huge horns on the front and is always saying stuff like 'Curse mine half brother, Thor. Yet again his interference hath fouled mine schemes. But I shall have my vengeance upon him anon!'. "

Giles tried very hard not to roll his eyes. He failed. "As amusing as that was, Xander, I do not think it wise to believe everything you learned from reading _Thor_ comic books as an actual lesson in mythology."

"Uh, yeah, I guess so," conceded the young man. Then Xander perked up a bit. "Wait a second. How did you know that stuff was from the _Thor_ comics?"

Giles flushed slightly red but he regained himself. "Well, er, I was a child once myself. And the do sell American comic books in Englandâ€|"

"Our stuffy book guy Giles was a comic fan?" grinned Xander. "This belongs on the front page of one of those British tabloids. Right next to the story and Prince Charles' secret wedding to the three-headed clone of Elvis."

"Hey, what books did you read?" rambled the Scooby Gang member. "No, let me guess. You liked Green Lantern. You seem like the Green Lantern type."

Giles was now looking very embarrassed. "Actually, I preferred the Flash. However, to bring this back to something remotely relative, I will enlighten Mr. Harris here will real facts on Loki."

Urd somehow surpressed a groan. This Giles guy talked *way* too much. Plus, just the mention of Loki's name brought back a lot of bad memories.

"Loki was one of the Aesir, the primary pantheon of the Norse gods. He was the god of fire as well as a shapershifter and trickster. He was also responsible for the death of Balder, the god of light."

As punishment for killing Balder, Loki was chained to three large boulders; one under his shoulders, one under his loins and one under his knees. A poisonous snake was placed above his head. The dripping venom that lands on him is caught by Sigyn, his faithful wife, in a bowl. But every now and then, when the bowl is filled, she must leave him to empty it. Then the poison that falls on Loki's face makes him twist in pain, causing earthquakes."

"That's kinda romantic," said Buffy.

"And sad," added Willow.

"Poor Sigyn," whispered Belldandy. "I remember the day Allfather Odin sentenced Loki. She cried and begged Odin for mercy for her husband. But all of Asgard was stricken over Balder's death. They wanted Loki to suffer for what he'd done. Sadly, because of her love for him, Sigyn was forced to suffer as well."

"Try not to think about it, sis," advised Urd as she placed a comforting hand on her sister's shoulder. "I know it's tough, especially since you used to be really close to Sigyn before all that happened. But we've still gotta find Mara. She's looking to pay us back for destroying the Lord of Terror and she just may be using the Hellmouth to do it. We can't let that happen."

Giles' face suddenly lost quite a bit of color. "Did you say the Lord of Terror?"

"Yep, she did," confirmed Skuld. "Mara managed to free him a few weeks ago and he went and possessed Urd. It took everything Belldandy and I had to stop him from destroying the universe."

Urd burned her hands in her face. "Thanks, Skuld. Thanks for letting strangers in on the worst experience of my life."

"I'm getting real tired of saying this," began Xander "but could I have an explanation. Who or what is the Lord of Terror? Other than the name of a movie that probably had Vincent Price or Christopher Lee in it."

"The Lord of Terror is a legendary demon," informed Giles. "A demon said to have fantastic power. Power enough to destroy all of creation. It's also said that when Lord of Terror returned to the Earth he would possess skin of bronze."

"Nevermind my long legs and tone body," joked Urd. But then her face darkened somewhat. "As much as I hate to admit it, what Skuld said is true. Lucky me, I was the one the Lord of Terror wanted to use as a vessel to destroy the universe and then remake it in his own image. As it is, we're fortunate that all that got destroyed was the Makuhari Messe Convention Center. Never mind the mess all that left the Yggdrasil in."

Buffy arched her eyebrows. "Makuhari Messe Convention Center? Isn't that the place you told me about this morning, Giles?"

"Indeed it is," confirmed the Watcher. "So it wasn't mass hysteria and such. It was actually the Lord of Terror. Fascinating."

"Uh, question," said Willow as she raised her hand tentatively.
"What's a Yggdrasil?"

Everyone looked at Giles. The Englishmen looked at them confused for a moment. Realization then hit him and he reached for his book. "The Yggdrasil, also called the World Tree, is the giant ash tree that links and shelters all the layers of the universe. It is guarded by the Norns who pour water from the Well of Fate into its branches to prevent decay."

"Now that is a perfect example of why you should never believe everything you read in books," muttered Urd. "I'm a goddess, not a gardener. Before I got stuck here on Earth I was the System Operator for Yggdrasil."

"'System Operator?'" repeated Willow. "You mean like with computers?" The young witch felt her curiosity raise. Just what kind of computers did goddesses use?

"And I was the debugger," added Skuld. "Of course, Yggdrasil bugs are a lot tougher than normal computer bugs. For one thing they look like rabbits with eight legs and they move really fast. It takes real skill to fix them." Skuld then gave a quick demonstration of what she meant by 'fix' by giving her hammer a test swing.

"Do you mean to tell me that the Yggdrasil is a computer?" demanded Giles. The Watcher had again gone a bit pale.

"Yes, it is" confirmed Belldandy. "The ancient people of the Norseland described our system as best they could using things they understood to explain what they didn't. Essentially, the Yggdrasil is the computer that runs the operations of the universe."

"The universe is run by a computer?" boggled Buffy. "This doesn't mean that Bill Gates is God, does it?"

Xander was also having a hard time buying this bit of news. "The universe is run a great big Game Boy? Who says God doesn't have a sense of humor?"

Willow, unlike the others, had no problem with this news. Computers were cool. Except when there's a demon with its eyes on you living inside one. "So did you work on the Yggdrasil too, Belldandy?"

The goddess shook her head. "No, I was in the Goddess Relief Office. The job of the GRO is mostly to grant wishes to people deemed worthy. People like Julian."

Xander rubbed his temples as if he had a headache. "Okay, I now declare no more learning. It's Friday, school's over, I don't want to be within 300 yards of a fact until Monday."

That was when Giles giggled. "Of course the universe is run by a computer," he said. "That explains so very, very much. London drivers, Eddie Izzard, people who won't stop talking during movies, those dreadful Australian soap operas, spam, why it's so hard to get a good scone in this country— It even explains the French."

Everyone stared at Giles as he continued to ramble.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Skuld.

"Giles doesn't like computers. Big time," said Willow. "I guess finding out the universe is run by one was a bit much for him."

"Buffy, Giles is going bye bye. Maybe you should do something," suggested Xander.

The Slayer nodded her head. "Right. Do something. Like what?"

It was then that the library doors flew open and Oz hustled in "Hey, guys, we've got trouble. I just--" The musician stopped short as he saw the newcomers to the Scooby Gang.

"Who invited the werewolf?" asked Urd.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Picture if you will an ordinary hand-held video camera. Now picture what said camera would look like if it grew legs, a tail and wings. If you can imagine that, then you can picture the creature that was currently peering through the library windows.

It had been positioned there since before Buffy and the goddesses had arrived, the lens that served as its eye recording all. Now the thing felt that it had seen enough. With a few flaps of its wings the creature pulled itself into the air. It then flew off silently into the Sunnydale night.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Author's Notes: Wow, looking back I'm rather amazed that I've been working on this story for about a year and a half. Nothing gets in the way of finding time to write like college. ;) Anyway, since I'm at what I'd consider the middle of "Brimstone Raising" I thought now would be a good time to go back and point out some of the little in-jokes and fun bits that I tossed into this story for my own amusement as much as the reader's. To do this I'll post the line I'll be commenting on in italics and under that, in regular text, my comments. And you thought commentary like this only came with good DVDs.

To kick off this tidbits fest I guess I'll start by telling you how I came up with this story's title. As you may have guessed by this point I'm a big fan of comic books. In 1995 Wildstorm Comics had an event that ran through all the titles they published called "Wildstorm Raising". The title was meant to reflect that the Wildstorm Universe, due to the crossover, would be undergoing massive change and evolution. Unlike most crossovers of this sort done by major publishers, this story really did have longterm consequences for just about everyone involved.

Anyway, I really loved the title of the story so I filled it away in that part of my brain that I have set aside for remembering stuff that's cool and might be useful later on. Now please note that this story came out about three years before I started writing fanfic. I hadn't even heard of fanfic back then.

So now jump forward to the time when I've had the idea for the story and have started to work on the plot. As is my habit, I never start writing until I have a title and the plot worked out in my head. As I'm mulling over what to call the story the title of that comic crossover from many years ago foalts to the surface of my thoughts for some reason. The "raising" part sounds cool but something was missing. Since Mara is at the core of the story I started to think of words that describe her in hopes of getting ideas. Since Mara is a demon the word brimstone came to mind. Plus, since Sunnydale is on the Hellmouth, brimstone is also a good word for the Buffyverse.

Put them together and you have our title. However, the title also has two other meanings. One, brimstone represents the power of evil that Mara's plan could unleash. Second, with brimstone representing Mara, this story shows her "raising" as a bad guy, being more cunning, ruthless and just plain evil than she was in the _Oh My Goddess!_ manga.

Well, enough of that. Let's point out some Easter eggs.

—

He'd killed her and an entire tent full of wounded Confederate soldiers in 1863, just after the surrender of Vicksburg.

—

The surrender of Vicksburg, Mississippi occurred after the Union Army laid siege to the city for several months and eventually starved out the members of the Confederate Army who had been holed up there. It was one of the key turning points in the American Civil War.

Angel actually only read the first few lines of _The Second Coming_ by William Butler Yeats, one of Ireland's most famous poets. I only had him read that part because it applied very well to the story.

G'Kar also reads a portion of this poem on an episode of _Babylon 5_. I forget the title, but, IIRC, it was just before the start of the Shadow War.

The TV shows Urd was watching were: _Star Trek: The Next Generation_, _Urusei Yatsura_, _Quantum Leap_, _Neon Genesis Evangelion_ and _Knight Rider_ respectively.

—

_He took a swig from his can of Pepsi and returned his attention to the book he'd been reading, _The Rum Diary_ by Hunter S. Thompson._

— —

Hunter S. Thompson is my favorite author. In addition to _The Rum Diary_ he also wrote _The Great Shark Hunt_, _Generation of Swine_ and _Fear and Loathing In Las Vegas_ among others. _Fear and Loathing In Las Vegas_ is right at the top of my lists for both favorite books and movies.

_"Sunnydale? Prof. Jurgens mentioned that place in class last

month." _

--

The last name Jurgens is a tribute to comic book writer/artist Dan Jurgens, best known for his work on books like _Superman_ and _Thor_.

"Fly me to the moon and let me play among the stars. Let me see what spring is like on Jupiter and Mars" sang as soft voice._

--

"Fly Me To the Moon" was one of Frank Sinatra's biggest hits. The song was also the ending theme to _Neon Genesis Evangelion_, one of my all-time favorite anime shows.

"I'll go with bizarre lifeform from the planet Metaluna," said Xander._

--

This is a reference to a famous sci-fi movie from the 1950's called _This Island Earth_. It's considered a classic by a lot of people, though I'm at a loss as to why. The plot is dumb and full of holes and the acting is more wooden than a Redwood forest.

The only thing about the film that I liked was that the guy who played the Professor _on Gilligan's Island_ was in it. _This Island Earth_ got a much-needed riffing _in Mystery Science Theater 3000: The Movie_, which I strongly recommend.

"I'm telling you guys, I really think the lunch lady is trying to kill us," said Xander as he began to prod the goo with a fork._

--

Xander's right on the money with this one as evidenced in "Earshot".

"I say thee nay!" retorted Xander. "Mock not my comics or I shall smite thee with mine hammer, mighty Mjolnir!"_

--

Xander's clearly been reading a lot of the _Thor_ comic books published by Marvel Comics. If you ever read interviews with Joss Whedon and a lot of the other folks who work and _Buffy_ and _Angel_ you'll find that many love comics, especially the ones put out by Marvel. References to Marvel characters have popped up in several _Buff_y episodes.

"My roommate back at UCS disappeared after about a week of classes. He left a note saying college was to much for him, but he didn't go home."_

--

This was the M.O. Sunday and her pals used to cover up their feeding in season four's "The Freshmen".

_ "But I've been having a case of the creppies ever since I heard about the earthquake last night._

I strayed from Buffy continuity on this one. Buffy says that the quake that happens in season four's "Doomed" is the first one to hit Sunnydale since "Prophecy Girl" in season one.

_ "I could recheck the _Pergamum Codex_, but none of my research has turned up any indication that we're due for any major supernatural activity," said the Englishman as he sipped from his ever-present cup of tea._

--

_ _The _Pergamum Codex _is a book of Slayer prophecy that is never wrong. It predicted Buffy's death at the hands of the Master in "Prophecy Girl".

_ "Meteor shower? Please don't tell me I'm going to have to start worrying about being replaced by a pod person every time I go to sleep."_

--

Buffy is referring to the film _Invasion of the Body Snatchers_ where aliens grab people and replace them with copies when they sleep. It's your choice if she's referring to the famous version of the film from the 50s or the 70s remake.

_ "I thought in Japan it was supposed to be giant lizards and moths. So what's deal with all this weird?"_

--

Buffy is referring to Godzilla and Mothra, two of Japan's most famous giant movie monsters.

Giles studying in Japan is something I made up on my own. But we do know that Giles does speak several languages so who says Japanese can't be one of them?

Plus, in season five's "Checkpoint" Anthony Head gives Buffy the names of several martial arts moves to perform in front of members of the Watcher's Council. I'm a second year Japanese student so I can tell you Anthony's pronunciation was great.

To my unending delight, that wasn't the only time things would pop up on new episodes of _Buff_y that fit perfectly with this story. But more on that later.

_ Giles was again taking a drink of tea. "Marvelous country Japan. Delightful people and lovely tea. Did you know that in the traditional Japanese tea ceremony--"_

--

I actually got to see a tea ceremony when I was in Nagoya, Japan in June of 2001. It really is a wonderful example of Japanese culture and I felt very honored to be a part of it. It's very traditional and

just the sort of thing Giles would love.

The song Urd listens to on the radio is "Bitch" by Meredith Brooks. Normally I'm not a fan of songfics and stuff like that, but this song was just so perfect for Urd I had to use it.

"Thanks. Now that we're done here maybe we should head to Rice Field Cemetery. I was there yesterday and saw some evidence that someone may have been skulking around."

--

The name Rice Field Cemetery is a private joke. It's the name of a cemetery that was across the street from my high school. Not right across the street, mind you. You'd have to walk across the parking lot and the soccer field from the entrance to the school to get there. But there was only one street to cross to get to the gates. I always found it odd that I could see a place where dead people were from my seat in 10th grade English class. Oh, and Rice Field was also the name of the football field.

My high school may not have been built on a Hellmouth but it was built on reclaimed swampland. I always figured that was ironic in some way but was never sure how.

"I've got a bad feeling about this..."

--

Luna says this all the time in the English dub of *Sailor Moon*. IIRC, it also pops up at least once in all of the movies in the original *Star Wars* Trilogy.

The cartoons Skuld watched were: *G.I. Joe*, *Slayers*, *Batman: The Animated Series*, *Sailor Moon*, *Transformers*, *Pokémon* and *M.A.S.K.*

Can you tell I was a kid in the 80s or what?

"Reverse the polarity of the neutron flow! Warp factor six, Mr. Sulu!" shouted the goddess.

--

Those are references to the classic British sci-fi series *Dr. Who* and the original *Star Trek* respectively.

"Right. And I'm a Chinese jet pilot."

--

Skuld is parroting Bruce Campbell in *Army of Darkness*, another of my all-time favorite movies.

"Don't sass me, Scully, er, Skuld," growled Urd. "Now where's Belldandy and Kento, uh, I mean, Kensuke, no, that's not it. Aw, hell! Where's Belldandy and the short, uptight guy we live with?"

--

Urd manages to get names of characters from _X-Files_, _Ronin Warriors_ and _Neon Genesis Evangelion_ mixed up with the names of the folks she lives with.

"You really know how to put the brakes on a good Dennis Miller-esqe rant, you know that?"

--

Dennis Miller is a comedian best know for his wild rants and ability to shoot odd cultural references off at a mile a minute. He's also the host of the talk _shoe Dennis Miller Live_ and serves as a commentator on _Monday Night Football_.

Dennis is my favorite comedian as well as a role model of mine.

--

"That's me, Inspiration Guy," grinned Xander as he ran an imaginary comb though his hair. "Tony Robbins beware."

--

Tony Robbins is a self-help guru/genetic anomaly who has gained fame and fortune by suckering the gullible out of their money.

_"I guess I can beat the Bronze's _Darkstalkers_ game again some other time."_

--- --

Darkstalkers is a cool fighting game (and mediocre anime and manga) that was called _Vampire Hunter_ in Japan. It's also one of the few fighting game I've ever beaten. I really suck at fighting games.

--

And so it was that a condo than would fit right in on any sunny beach around the world had came to be built in Niflheim.

--

While there never was a way to make it come across in the story, the image of Mara's house that I have in my mind is the La Jolla, CA beachhouse that the comicbook heroes Gen13 call home. Sue me, I'm a Gen13 fanatic.

Parts of the speeches that Urd and Belldandy give Keiichi about demons and the Hellmouth were taken almost word for word from the speech Giles gives Xander and Willow in "The Harvest", the 2nd episode of Buffy.

I really love sneaking in stuff like that.

_ "They've sent us some very rare tomes including_ The Tragedies of Jusenkyo._ "

--

Will the _Ranma ½_ jokes ever stop? No, they won't. ;)

—

_ "We've also gotten_ Legends of the Yoroiden _which is about nine magical suits of armor._ Great Magicks of Other Worlds _is a guide to some the astonishingly powers spells used in realms outside our own. It contains a rather lengthy section on the mythological 'Dragon Slave'. That is a spell so powerful that it's said to be able to level whole cities with just one casting. It's also said that the spell's most famous caster, Lina Inver--"

--

_ _Those are referacnes to _Ronin Warriors_ and _Slayers_ respectively.

_ "Maybe I should switch to Dave Barry._ "

--

Dave Barry is a humorist whose work has appeared in _The Miami Herald_ and other American newspapers for years. He's had loads of his colums published in books and even a TV shows, _Dave' World_, based of his material.

Cool fact, Nicholas Brendon a.k.a. Xander, used to be a production assistant on _Dave's World_ before he was fired for napping on the job.

_ "Brave heart, Buffy," said Giles._ "

--

Peter Davison often used this line in his role as the 5th Doctor on the BBC Sci-fi sereis _Dr. Who_ to encourage his companion, Tegan. Interestingly, during Davison's run on the show the Doctor twice fought an evil, snake-like being called the Mara.

_ "I thought I was onto something when I found an abandoned factory on the outskirts of town that was giving off some bad vibes. I checked it out but the place was deserted. I'd say some of the local vamps must have used it as a base for a while. Other than that I got nothing._ "

--

The Factroy is the where Spike and Drusilla lived during their time in Sunnydale.

_ "Anyway, I'm Buffy, your friendly neighborhood vampire Slayer._ "

--

Buffy is making a play on the line 'your friendly neighborhood

Spider-Man'. It's one of the catch phrases used by the comic book hero Spider-Man. Mayhaps Xander's love of comics is rubbing off on our favorite Slayer.

He's no Deep Throat, but Giles is the king of looking stuff up.

--

Buffy is referring to the codename of the informant who gave Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward the information that broke the Watergate Scandal. Or maybe Buffy just saw _All the President's Men,_ which is the film version of the story and a great flick to boot.

Sorry, _X-Files_ fans, but in my mind she wasn't referring to Mulder's infamous informant.

On maps of Manhattan you'll find it listed as West Mid-Town. But the residents of the area have for decades given it the colorful moniker of Hell's Kitchen.

--

Hell's Kitchen is where Marvel Comics' hero Daredevil has long operated.

"Meanwhile, at the Hall of Justiceâ€¦" blared the TV.

--

The TV is picked up the old _SuperFriends_ TV show. A goofy as it was, I grew up watching the show so I do have a fondness for it.

Do I even need to explain who Whistler and Doyle are?

"John Constantine. Why am I not surprised to see you here?"

--

John is the star of the comic book series _Hellblazer_. It's a great book that I really recommend.

"'Fraid not, luv. Believe me, I wish I did know somethin'. I still owe that demon bitch some payback from the last time I got dragged into one of her messes."

--

Here's I'm referring to the classic _Oh My Goddess!/Hellblazer_ fanfic "Dire Fates" by Rod M and David Tai. Rod and David were cool enough to let me tie this fic to their work and I'm grateful for it. It's was "Dire Fates" that got me into OMG in this first place. If you get the chance to read any of their work do it. It's worth it.

_"This Jusenkyo place sounds like something right out of the _Twilight Zone_. Listen to some of the weird springs at this place. Spring-of-Drowned-Panda, Spring-of-Drowned-Piglet, Spring-of-Drowned-Cat, Spring-of-Drowned-Duck, Spring-of-Drownedâ€¦Yeti-riding-a-Bull-holding-a-Crane-and-Eel?"_

--

Here I'm referring to _Ranma ½_ characters by their Jusenkyo curses. In order we have Genma, Ryoga, Shampoo, Mousse and Pantyhose Tarou. Oh, and the bit Willow read was referring to the Spring of Akane. In a volume not yet out in English Akane fell into a Jusenkyo spring where nothing had ever drowned. Thus, it became the Spring of Akane and anyone who falls in turns into a copy of her.

"The diary of one of the last century's greatest Watchers, Makoto Hibiki. He was Japanese, but he visited the four corners of the Earth and recorded the legends of the all the places he visited."

--

Wow, who would have guessed that one of Ryoga's ancestors was a Watcher?

--

"According to Hibiki, 700 years ago a demon fell from the sky. For weeks the creature terrorized the countryside until one day a great ship shaped like a dragon appeared in the sky. Riding atop the dragon's back was a powerful samurai named Yosho. After a great battle Yosho managed to cleave three gems that were the source of the demon's power from its body. He then placed the gems in the hilt of his sword and sealed the demon in a cave. The sword then became the key to the seal. Should anyone foolishly take the sword back to the cave and break the seal the demon would then be free again."

--

This is the story of Ryoko from the _Tenchi Muyo_ OAVs.

Urd floated to the ground and gave Giles an appraising look. "Say, you look familiar. Were you ever on TV? Maybe a coffee commercial or something."

--

Anthony Stewart Head a.k.a. Giles was first introduced to the US in a coffee commercial. I can't remember what brand though.

"This book is the lost volume of the Icelandic Eddas, a collection of ancient writings that provide the most authoritative source on Norse mythology known today."

--

The Icelandic Eddas are a real thing that, like Giles said, are our main source for most of what we know about Norse myth today. I made up the bit about a lost volume, however.

The story of how Verdandi became Belldandy is also something I made up. The truth is Vs and Bs and Ls and Rs are interchangeable in Japanese. Do the pronunciation Japanese style and Verdandi becomes Belldandy.

"Who or what is the Lord of Terror? Other than the name of a movie that probably had Vincent Price or Christopher Lee in it."

--
Vincent Price and Christopher Lee were two of the greatest low-budget horror film actors ever.

Mara's videocamera monster popped in the Sympathy for the Devil trade paperback.

2. Something Wicked

Those that knew of its existence considered the Hellmouth to be the source of all evil in Sunnydale. Not an unreasonable feeling. But as would one day become clear to the Scooby Gang, there was another place in their town that could give the Hellmouth a run for its money. This place was called the mayor's office.

The interior of said office contained some bookshelves and a cabinet, shag carpeting, a few tasteful chairs and numerous plaques and awards on the walls. Two people were currently inside. One was a tall, wiry black man who wore a dark, hand-tailored suit just off the boat from Hong Kong. The other man sat behind the large oak desk that dominated the room. He was white, of average height, perhaps a bit overweight and wore a suit that had been on sale at JC Penny's the month before.

"So to make a long story short, you won't have to worry about your neighbor blasting his stereo at 3 a.m. again. Ever," reported Mr. Trick.

The Mayor shook his head and gave a sigh. "Well, it's not like Ted can't say I didn't ask him politely to stop first. But no, he just had to keep playing those John Denver albums at all hours of the night. He never returned that rake he borrowed either."

The Mayor's face then brightened. "Say, what with Ted being dead now I can finally go over there and get that back. Plus, I'll get to welcome some new neighbors in a few weeks. That's always fun."

"I'm glad my associates and I could be of assistance," said Mr. Trick. "If anyone else in your neighborhood is giving you a problem, nosy old ladies, meowing cats, paper boys who toss your paper in the bushes--"

The Mayor paused to consider this for a moment. "I think I'll give little Jimmy another week to shape up. What with him being twelve that's more than fair."

The sounds of someone clapping suddenly filled the room. The men turned to see Mara leaning against the door applauding, a faint smile on her face. "You go, Willie. Show that pre-pubescent print jockey who's boss."

"Mara," greeted the Mayor with a broad smile. "Gosh, I haven't seen you in ages. When were you here last? Back in 1975, wasn't it?"

"I've been busy," shrugged the demon as she casually dropped herself into a chair beside Mr. Trick. The vampire gave her a curious look

but said nothing. "And it was '76. The affair with those goblins and the old folks home."

The Mayor gave a small laugh and nodded. "Yes, it was '76 after all. Just before the bicentennial. Such a dreadful affair, that whole goblin thing. Those old folks were some of my staunchest supporters. Before they were eaten anyway."

Mr. Trick cleared his throat. "That's a story to be told, I'm sure. But, your honor, may I inquire as to just who our lovely guest is?"

"You got pepper up your nose or somethin', Dead Boy?" snorted Mara. "You should be able to smell the brimstone on me like it was French perfume. I'm Mara, demon first class, unlimited and an old friend of Willie."

"'Dead Boy'?" repeated Mr. Trick. Although he kept a calm face, the vampire felt the rage begin to burn within. No one talked to him like that.

Mara seemed to sense what was going on inside the vampire's mind. "Just try something," she sneered. "Prove you're dumber than you look."

"Now, Mara, Mr. Trick, lets all play nice," interrupted the Mayor.

Mara ignored him. Instead she leaned forward in her chair until she was right in Mr. Trick's face. "That's the problem with you vampires," she continued. "Up here, compared to mortals, you're hot stuff. That makes you arrogant. Makes you forget how to treat your betters."

Mr. Trick's eyes swelled with rage. "My betters?!" he growled.

Mara snickered. "Cool your jets, slick. The skin color of your shell means nothing to me. What I don't like is what you are inside. Inside you're a demon. You were probably some pathetic second class, limited back in the Pit. I bet you came up here as a vampire because you couldn't cut it in Hell's rat race. You've probably been on Earth so long you only remember what it's like Downstairs on a subconscious level."

Somewhere in Mr. Trick's mind, a part his waking mind rarely ventured into, something stirred. For a moment he felt the sensation of heat all around him. Tormented screams echoed in his ears. The smell of brimstone filled his nose. He'd noticed it faintly coming from Mara before but had dismissed it. Lots of things in Sunnydale smelled like that. But now that odor seemed to radiate from Mara. Some primal instinct within the vampire told him that she was indeed very dangerous. For the first time in decades, Mr. Trick felt fear.

Mara grinned a predator's smile. "Ah, so you haven't totally forgotten. Just remember who's top dog around here and we'll get along fine. I'm a demon, first class, unlimited. You're a corpse with an attitude."

Mr. Trick slowly nodded and tried to give a charming smile. "My most sincere apologies, dear lady," said the vamp as he gave a small bow.

"Please forgive me."

Mara made a rude noise. "Whatever. Just don't sit too close to me, Dead Boy."

The Mayor gave his guests the same look a father would give two naughty children. "Now that you're both done playing king of the hill you could tell me what brings you back to our fair city, Mara."

"Just a little bit of hellraising," answered the demon merrily. "Since I respect you, Willie, I thought I'd clue you into my plans. Professional courtesy as one servant of evil to another and all that."

"I certainly appreciate your consideration," said the Mayor. "But there's more to this little visit than just telling me you're in town, isn't there?"

Mara gave a giggle and a smile played briefly across her face. "You always were a sharp one, Willie. For a mortal."

"Anyway, I need a favor. Urd and her sisters have probably figured out I'm here. You can bet your soul, if you still had it, that they're on their way to Sunnydale to try and ruin my fun. Then I can handle. What I need from you is a few local vamps to use as goons. To gather some supplies I'll need and to keep an eye on the Slayer for me. I don't want that little tramp butting in on my little project either."

"Darn it, Mara," cursed the Mayor as he shook his head. "I've worked very hard to keep divine beings out of Sunnydale. Now you're telling me that not one but three goddesses, the Norns no less, are coming here." The demonic politician paused for a second to massage his forehead. "This could turn into quite the sticky pickle. And right on the verge of my Asencion."

"Relax, Willie," sighed Mara. "The Norns don't know anything about your Asencion. I wanted them to follow me here for a reason. That being when I unleash my spell it'll be right under their noses. And as the world shudders from its affects it'll be the goddesses who take the blame."

"A nice plan," complimented the Mayor. "But that doesn't help me."

"Of course it does," exclaimed the demon. "When the spell is turned loose the Slayer and the Powers That Be will have their hands full dealing with the repercussions. Trust me, you and your plans will be the last thing on their minds."

"And just what is this spell exactly?" inquired Mr. Trick politely.

Mara gave the vampire another dirty look. "Mayor's ears only," she replied. The demon then left her chair and strolled to the Mayor's side. She then leaned down and whispered quickly in his ear. The Mayor listened intently.

Sunnydale's mayor hhhmmmed. "Quite an amusing plan. But its affects

could endanger Sunnydale and thusly my Asencion. That would be bad for both of us."

Mara waved her hand dismissivly. "I know how many big shots downstairs have invested in you, Willie. With a few modifications the spell can be made to leave Sunnydale virtually undamaged. Some minor things may get a bit hectic, but you'll still be able to perform your Asencion with no problems."

The Mayor took a deep breath as he pondered the demon's words. "Very well, Mara, I'll help you," he said eventually. "Mr. Trick, I believe you can supply the operatives my associate needs."

"Easily," said the vampire as he flashed his most dazzling smile. "In fact, I'll round up those you need personally." Mr. Trick then stood, nodded at the Mayor and gave Mara a short bow. The demon made a disgusted face. Mr. Trick pretended not to notice before skittering out the door.

"Heh. Guess I showed him," chuckled Mara as she dropped back into her chair.

"Yes, you did," said the Mayor in a slightly annoyed voice. "In the future, Mara, I'd appreciate it if you didn't treat my underlings like that. Mr. Trick has been most helpful to me in fulfilling some final rituals for my Asencion."

"And I haven't?" balked Mara. "Have you forgotten who helped broker some of the deals that got you on this road?"

"Of course I haven't," assured the Mayor. "All of this would have been much more difficult without you. It's just that the stars are almost right and I can't have anything going wrong right now. This will be the most important moment of my life. Even bigger than that dinner I had with President Nixon."

"Yeah, ol' Tricky Dick was a fun guy," recalled Mara. "Helping out on his reelection campaign was one of the best times I had back in the 70's. It was almost as much fun as when I got to club all those hippies in Chicago back in '68."

"Of course, Nixon's problem was that he thought too small. And making those tapes. I warned him about that but he just wouldn't listen." Anyway, all Nixon wanted from me was another four years in office. But I can do better than that for you Willie."

The Mayor arched his eyebrows. "Really? I'm all ears."

Mara stood and began to pace in front of the politician's desk. "Your Asencion is a big deal to a lot of famous names down in the Pit. You'll be going from mortal to a pure demon. A demon just like me." Mara stopped her pacing and fixed the Mayor with her gaze. "Well, not exactly like me. You'll go from mortal to second class, unlimited."

The Mayor fished a bag of jellybeans from his pocket, popped a few in his mouth and sighed. "Yes, first class, limited. Still able to cause massive devastation but so far from the real fun of first class, unlimited. You know, when I found out about that I was depressed for a week. Not even reading Mary Worth in the paper every morning

could make me feel better."

Mara hopped up on the Mayor's desk, her back to the man and began to kick her legs back and forth slightly. "Asencion or not, it takes centuries to earn first class, unlimited status. Trust me, I know. By Ragnarok, if it weren't for the fact that you built this little playground right on of the Hellmouth you would have only made second class limited. Well, that and a few good words in the right ears from yours truly."

"All right, Mara. We both know that I owe you. No need to keep bringing it up. No one likes a Bragging Berry." The Mayor took a moment to glance at his watch. "Now, my dear, I've got an early meeting with the PTA tomorrow. If you have something you want to say please say it."

Mara hopped down from the desk and faced the Mayor. "Simple fact is I like you, Willie," began the blonde demon. "For a mortal, you've got style. So as a thank you for helping me out on this one, I'll do what I can to get you moving though the ranks once your Ascension is complete."

"That sounds just swell," grinned the Mayor. "You see, isn't it amazing what people can do work together." The politician paused for a moment to scratch his chin. "Hhhmmm, working together. I might want to find some room for that in my Asencion speech. Maybe right before that bit on civic pride. Give the kids something positive to think about before they're eaten."

It was then that a tapping sound was heard at the window. Mara's videocamera creature sat on the sill waiting to be let in.

"Ah, my little servant is back," said Mara. "He must have found something important." Mara waved her hand in the direction of the window and it instantly burst open. The creature then quickly flew inside and landed on the Mayor's desk.

"Interesting little thing," mused the Mayor as he looked at the newcomer. "Does it come in coffer maker?"

"Free advice, Willie. Stick to the jokes you pay someone to write for you," advised Mara as she gave the creature a friendly stroke. Once it was done enjoying the attention of its mistress the creature got down to work. A ripple went through its body. As the ripple moved down the thing's tail said tail turned into a connection plug very similar to the ones people use to hook headphones up to stereos. Once the change was complete Mara casually took the connection and inserted it into the flesh just behind her ear.

Mara closed her eyes and was still for a several moments. When she opened them she wasn't smiling. "Damn it!"

"What's the matter, my dear?" asked the Mayor. "Someone perform a blessing on your favorite piece of unholy ground?"

"Worse," snapped Mara as she pulled the connection from her flesh. "The goddesses have hooked up with the Slayer and her little friends."

The Mayor frowned. "Now that could be a problem. For both of

us."

"No, it won't be," vowed Mara, the anger growing on her face. "I had my own plans for dealing with the Slayer but those are no good anymore. Right now there's only one way to deal with this situation."

"And what's that?"

Mara grinned her nastiest grin. "There's no time to think up anything clever. So I'll just use good old-fashioned demonic violence. I'll show those goddesses and their little mortal friends just how nasty a first class, unlimited can be. Especially if they're named Mara!"

Mara then gave off a burst of her trademark laugh before disappearing. Once she was gone the camera monster looked around, puzzled for a moment. It then took to the air and zipped out the window, presumably in search of its mistress.

The Mayor, now alone, sat silent for a moment. "Well, things sure are getting interesting now," he chuckled after a moment. "It should be fun seeing what Mara has in store of the Slayer, her friends and the goddesses. Yes indeed, it's times like this when it's good to be the Mayor."

A grin just as nasty as any ever worn by Mara found its way to the Mayor's face. "Especially now since everything is going according to the plan."

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He made almost no noise as he walked. Like a shadow clad in black, Angel moved quietly through the Sunnydale night. The vampire had been out patrolling since just after dusk, but an eerie calm had settled over the city. For whatever reason, it seemed that the forces of darkness had decided to stay at home tonight.

This, much to his dismay, had given Angel a lot of time to think. He'd spent much of tonight's lonely hunt reflecting on his brusque treatment of Buffy the night before. And his dream about Mara.

"What's happening to us?" murmured the vampire as he walked down a quite suburban street near Sunnydale High. Things between him and Buffy had been less than stellar of late. Angel sensed, in the way that only someone who had lived as long as he had could, that his relationship with the Slayer was going to come to a head of some sort soon. And when that did happen it wasn't going to be pleasant for either of them.

Angel pushed those thoughts away and tried to focus on the task at hand. Earlier Buffy had gotten word to him about the meeting at the library. Dropping by would give Angel a chance to apologize to Buffy and find out if Giles had learned anything about Mara.

As he made his way through the back parking lot of Sunnydale High a strong gust of wind came up from nowhere. As the wind battered him Angel instinctively drew his coat close and raised a hand to shield his eyes. The gale abated moments later and Angel took a second to

run a hand through his slightly mused hair. "By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes," recited the vampire as resumed his walk to the school.

He only managed a few steps before he slammed into the air. Angel stumbled back, cursing, as the air in front of him briefly flared bright blue and an electrical sound filled the night. Once he'd recovered Angel cautiously put out a hand in front of him and probed the air. In seconds it touched something where there seemed to be nothing. As he pressed the barrier, blue light again flared, showing the wall before him.

"A force field," assessed Angel. "That's a new one." The vampire then turned back the way he'd come hoping to find a quick way around. He made in all of two steps before he hit another barrier. A few seconds of angry, frantic searching confirmed what Angel had feared; he was trapped from all sides and above in a area of about ten feet square.

A burst of staccato laughter suddenly filled the night. Angel jerked his head toward the source of the laughter to see Mara floating calmly in the air near him. "You have no idea how right you were, Dead Boy," mocked Mara as she floated to the ground. "Something wicked this way does indeed come." As soon as her feet touched the pavement she struck a cheesecake pose meant to accent her body and the leather outfit that had become one of her trademarks. "Something wicked and dead sexy!"

"Let me out, Mara!" demanded Angel as he vamped out.

"Right. Like that's going to happen," mocked the demon. An inquisitive look then filled Mara's eyes. "I see that you know my name. Looks like someone has gotten some of their memory back. Have you remembered the first time we met yet, my little fallen angel?"

Angel remained silent.

Mara shrugged. "Oh well, I'm sure it will come to you sooner or later. Right now I have business with your ex paramour and her little friends."

"Mara, if you hurt her I'll--" began Angel.

"Do nothing!" interrupted the blonde demon, icily. "Or have you not noticed that you're stuck in an invisible box like a lame street mine? And you're going to stay in there until I've taught those brats and the limey a lesson about what happens to people who stick their noses into my business."

A sick smile then spread over Mara's face. "I only wish I could see the look on your face when you see what I've done to your friends knowing that you were helpless to stop me. Think of it as a little taste of the fun you had back in Hell. Trust me, Dead Boy, ol' Mara has plenty more Hell in store for you and your pals."

"Damn you, Mara!" howled Angel as he futilely punched at the walls of his prison.

"Been there, done that, bought the T-shirt," snickered Mara. She then

vanished.

"Buffy!" shouted Angel as he kept trying to escape. Sadly, unbeknownst to him, Mara's spell was keeping his voice trapped in the box as well.

As Angel continued to shout another strong gust of wind blew through the parking lot. In the shadows someone watched and smiled.

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"and that's where you came in," concluded Giles.

Oz nodded. "Gotcha. Goddesses, huh? Groovy."

"So now that we're all in the know, and may I just add that knowing is half the battle, what do we do now?" asked Xander.

"An excellent question," said Giles. "Given the rather extraordinary circumstances of our situation I'm open to suggestions."

"I've got one," chimed in Urd. "Someone get me a drink."

All the humans in the room gave the goddess a befuddled look.

"What?! What are you staring at?!" demanded Urd.

"I know things look kinda bad," began Buffy "but I don't think anyone getting drunk is going to help things."

"Buffy's right," nodded Xander. "We've already got a nasty new demon in town looking for trouble. The last thing we need is a goddess going around doing her impression of Ted Kennedy."

"Perhaps I should explain this as well," interrupted Belldandy. "While we exist on the mortal plane my sisters and I are open to certain human frailties. Fatigue being one of them. We each have a way unique to each of us for recovering our energy. I can regain power by sleeping. Skuld regains her energy by eating ice cream and Urd from drinking alcohol. It's been a very long day and the three of us are all rather tired. That's why Urd wanted something to drink. It was to regain her strength. Not toâ€¦ toâ€¦"

"Get in touch with her inner Barney Gumble?" supplied Xander helpfully.

"And I get hassled for watching too much TV," muttered Urd. "Anyway, now that Belldandy's done playing Mr. Wizard will someone tell me where I can get a drink around here?"

Everyone just started at Urd and was silent.

"Oh come on!" groused the goddess as she stomped across the library to where Oz and Xander stood. She stopped in front of the two boys and gave them a once-over. "I've seen every movie John Hughes ever made. Now you mean to tell me that two teenage American males like yourselves don't know who's hiding booze in their locker? And I know there must be at least a couple of kids here doing that."

"Sorry," shrugged Xander. "Principle Snyder has been on a locker search rampage this month."

Oz nodded sagely in concurrence. "Yeah, now everyone has to hide their beer in the trunks of their cars. Talk about a drag."

"Dammit," cursed Urd. "There's got to be something to drink around this joint somewhere."

Xander looked at Oz. Oz looked at Xander. A brief, wordless conversation ensued. Where it was over the two boys turned and faced the goddess. "Teacher's lounge," they chorused.

"Of course!" exclaimed Urd, her face lighting up. "If you'll excuse me, I'm just going for a quick pick-me-up." Without another word Urd strolled out of the library in search of her prey.

"Now that Urd's, er, needs have been attended to perhaps a spot of research is in order," said Giles. "At this point the only thing we know for sure is that Mara is most likely in Sunnydale up to no good."

"You mentioned earlier that you regain energy by sleeping," said Buffy as she turned to Belldandy. "Since demon research is one of the most boring things known to man this side of a PBS pledge drive maybe you should take some time to charge up the old batteries."

"It's kind of you to offer, but I think having one of us here would greatly aid your search efforts," replied the goddess.

"I can do it!" exclaimed Skuld. "After that whole Lord of Terror thing I read everything I could find on Mara. And I was the one that figured out that she could be in Sunnydale. Trust me, I can be a help, sis!"

Belldandy had to concede to Skuld had behaved very capably of late. And she was so very tired. "Well, perhaps just a brief restâ€|"

"Follow me," said Buffy. "There's a bed in the nurse's office that you can use."

"All right," conceded the goddess. "But if you need meâ€|"

"We'll wake you ASAP," vowed Skuld as she made the cross-your-heart sign.

Belldandy gave her little sister one last smile before following Buffy out of the library.

"I supposed we'd best get started," said Giles. "Xander, Oz, there's a book around here somewhere that may be of use to us but I'll need some help finding it."

"Yay, we're going to play 'Where's Waldo?' with some book written before the discovery of America," grumbled Xander. "The party just never ends here at Sunnydale High."

Oz said nothing as he followed after Xander and Giles.

"While they're looking for Giles' book why don't you help me look for information about Mara on-line," suggested Willow to Skuld.

Skuld gave the redhead one of her happiest smiles. "Did you say on-line?"

Soon the two were in that high-tech heaven only those born with a love of machines could ever know.

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In the darkness of Principle Snyder's office Mara sat, her legs propped up on the surly man's desk, watching a hand-held TV. After leaving the Mayor she'd dispatched her video-camera minion back to spying through the window of the library. The images it had just shown her made the demon smile.

"Oh, you foolish little goddesses," sighed Mara. "You came here to stop me and all you're doing is making things easier for me. Now I don't have to go through the trouble of finding a way to separate you from the mortals. So without further adieu!"

Mara slowly raised one of her arms into the air and then snapped her fingers loudly.

"It's showtime!"

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"Cheap stuff, off brand, expired, cooking sherry!" Cripes, don't they have anything drinkable in here?!" muttered Urd as she looked through the fridge in the teacher's lounge. "Then again, I'm talking about booze bought by people on a public servant's salary. What else should I expect?"

A few more moments' search brought the goddess what she'd been searching for. "Ah ha! Sweet, sweet vodka! Come to Urd, you yummy little Russian delight."

Just as Urd brought the bottle to her lips she felt a sudden wave of nausea pass through her. The vodka fell from her hand and smashed on the floor. A chill went down the goddess's spine as she realized what was happening.

"Oh crap!"

As Urd teleported away the last thing on her mind was the wasted vodka.

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On the other side of the school Buffy and Belldandy were walking quietly toward the nurse's office.

"Belldandy?"

"Yes?"

"Can I ask you something?" said the Slayer with more than a hint of discomfort in her voice.

"Certainly. If I can I'll be happy to answer."

The certainty of the goddess's words eased Buffy's worry. Just a little. "Okay, here goes. Is there a point to it all?"

Belldandy stopped dead in her tracks and gave the Slayer a quizzical look. "I'm afraid I don't follow. A point to what?"

"Well, to life, the universe and everything," began Buffy. "I mean, look at me. I'm the Chosen One. But chosen by whom? And why? I know I'm supposed to kill vampires and demons and stuff but what's the point? As soon as I dust one two more pop up to take its place. I just want to know if there's a point all of this. You're a goddess. I figure if anyone would know it's you."

Belldandy was silent and after a long moment she looked away from the Slayer. Buffy suddenly felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

After a few more moments the goddess finally spoke. "When I told you I'd answer question if I could I was telling you the truth. And the truth is I don't know, Buffy."

"But you're goddess. How could you not know?"

"I'm a goddess but I'm not God," answered Belldandy. "Why the Almighty does what he does is a mystery even to beings like myself. Even a goddess has to learn to just have faith."

Now it was Buffy's turn to be silent while she thought those words over. "I guess it's just that since I became the Slayer I've seen a lot of people I know suffer or get hurt. Some of them have even died. And I've never gotten the slightest hint as to why. Why me? Why did Buffy Summers have to be the Chosen One? And why does me being the Slayer always seem to hurt the people I care about? That's I've wondered about for years now but never thought I'd get an answer for."

Buffy took a moment to let out a long breath. "And then today I met not one but three goddesses. Sorry to dump all that philosophical stuff and emotional stuff on you all at once. But I thought this might be my one chance to finally get some answers and I guess it just got to me."

Belldandy laid a comforting hand on Buffy's shoulder and gave her a warm smile. "I wish I had the answers you were looking for, Buffy. Pain is a part of life. But it is often through pain's trials that we change, grow and become stronger people. The willingness to take pain for yourself in order to spare others is one of the ways we show love. And in the end love and faith are all we really need. I have the love of my sisters and my friends. And I have faith that what I do is meaningful and that whatever pains I endure are part of the path I must walk in order to achieve my purpose in life."

"Which is?" asked the Slayer.

"To simply be Belldandy," answered the goddess.

To that Buffy gave a small chuckle. "Heady stuff. Usually my idea of philosophy doesn't extent beyond reading a fortune cookie. Thanks, Belldandy. I'll think about what you said."

The goddess was about to reply when a wave of nausea hit here. Belldandy stumbled forward and clutched her chest with one hand.

"Belldandy! Are you all right?" exclaimed the blonde girl as grabbed the goddess just in time to stop here from falling to floor.

"It's Mara. She's here. She's in the school and she's just cast a very powerful spell. She'sâ€|" Belldandy stopped short for a moment to catch her breath. Suddenly her eyes when wide and the goddess gasped. "She's in the library! Skuld!"

Buffy had just began to turn to run back to the library when she felt Belldandy's hand clamp down on her arm. The next instant the Slayer and the Goddess teleported away.

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"Hhhmmm, it doesn't look like there's anything about Mara on this site," noted Skuld as she peered over Willow's shoulder at the computer screen.

"I think maybe we should try the Helsinki Institute of Occult Research next," suggested Willow. "Their section on Norse legends is pretty extensive."

"Sounds good," said Skuld. She then glanced at the checkout desk where Giles, Oz and Xander where rummaging though four boxes, one of which supposedly held the book Giles was so keen on finding. "Hey, how are you guys coming?"

"Do the words needle and haystack mean anything to you?" replied Xander as he dug around in one of the boxes.

"Keep trying," encouraged the little goddess. "Willow and I haven't found anythiâ€"Argh!"

Skuld's cry caught everyone's attention. Willow was able to move just fast enough to keep the younger girl from falling to the floor. "Skuld, are you okay?!" demanded the redhead.

Skuld's face had a slight tinge of green to it but the goddess managed to answer. "Somethin' just happened. Powerful magic, I think."

Over by the checkout desk Oz suddenly felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. His whole body seemed to prickle and he thought he caught the faint smell of brimstone. "Guys, uh, the old werewolf-sense seems to be picking up some really bad mojo."

As Willow helped Skuld steady herself she cast a cautious glance around the library. "Yeah, I think I sense something too. My magic skills aren't the greatest, but I'm pretty sure someone just cast a really powerful spell close by."

"I'll give you three guess as to who did it and the first two don't count," called a voice.

The Scooby Gang members and the goddess looked toward the far side of the library where Mara stood leaning casually against the railing of the second level. The demon had traded her jacket and pants in for some new togs. Mara's current outfit consisted of black boots with multiple straps and a black leather bodysuit that ran from her boots to her chest. On her chest Mara wore a vest of black leather held together by buckles and straps. The vest also featured two plates of blue metal that served as breastguards. A flowing cape that was black as pitch outside, but was blood red on the interior, set off the whole outfit.

"Mara!" chorused Oz and Skuld.

Mara grinned maliciously. "Hiya, kids. Who wants to have some fun? I know I do."

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As soon as Buffy felt Belldandy's hand grab her arm the world around her simply vanished. For a moment she felt an incredible sense of motion that reminded her of what happened when Han Solo took the Millennium Falcon to hyperspeed.

And then she hit a wall.

When the world returned to normal Buffy found herself lying on the floor outside the library, Urd and Belldandy each only a few away. The Slayer also quickly realized that her head **really** hurt.

"Damn Mara!" growled Urd as she scrambled to her feet. "She's set up a level-ten Hex Field."

Belldandy said nothing but nodded grimly as she to got to her feet.

"Okay, I'm not goddess but I'm guessing that this Hex Field dealie is bad," said Buffy.

"It's a very powerful spell of protection that demons are fond of," replied Belldandy. "As long as it's up we can't teleport in to help Skuld and your friends."

Buffy glared at the door of the library with a look that could melt steel. "Uh uh. No way. Not acceptable. I'm getting in there if I have to tear though this Hex Field with my bare hands."

With that Buffy got a running start and launched a flying toward the library door. As soon as her foot came within three feet of the door a wall of red energy crackled to life. In an instant the Slayer was knocked roughly back to the floor.

Instantly Belldandy was by the blonde girl's side. "Buffy, are you all right!?"

"My butt's going to be sore for awhile but I'll live," assured the Slayer as she stood. "So brute force didn't work. Now what?"

"A Hex Field may be powerful enough to keep even us out but it burns magick energy fast," began Urd. "This field will last five, maybe seven minutes tops."

"Still to long," said Buffy. "Who knows what Mara could do to Skuld and the others in that time. Isn't there anything else you can do?"

Belldandy and Urd looked at each other. In the instant that there gazes met Buffy could somehow feel the energy welling up within the Norn sisters. The two goddesses then nodded at each other.

The two sisters then stepped forward and stood next to each other. Quietly they began to chant something in a language Buffy knew couldn't possibly be human. Quickly the goddesses' chant grew louder and more intense. As the chant moved forward Buffy could see an aura of blue energy slowly surrounding the pair. When the chant began to reach its crescendo Urd and Belldandy stretched out their right arms, palms up, toward the door. As the chant reached its climactic end a pulse of blue energy raced from each goddesses' hand and impacted on the Hex Field. An area of crackling purple energy instantly formed where the two met.

"We're channeling as much of our power as we can to try and break though the field," answered Urd in a strained voice before the question had even formed on Buffy's tongue. "All this energy we're putting out will make the Hex Field use up its power more quickly. But it will still take a few minutes to break though. And by then neither of us will have much juice left to deal with Mara."

"Leave Mara to me," said Buffy icily as she pulled a stake from her coat. "Slaying demons is literally what I was born for."

Urd gave the Slayer an approving look.

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Hang on, guys, thought Buffy. _Just please hang on for a few more minutes._

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> Mara was happy. Belldandy, Urd, the Slayer and Angel were out of the way and the four mortals and Skuld where trapped in the library with her. But that wasn't what was making Mara truly happy. What made her happy was what she saw in the eyes of the people before her: fear. Sweet, sweet fear.<p>

"What do you want, Mara?" demanded Skuld, her trusty mallet now in one hand and a metal sphere with bright orange tubing running in and out of it in the other. "You better answer quick or I'll jam this Skuld Bomb right up your nasty ol' demon butt!"

Mara snickered. She'd give the little goddess point for courage if not for common sense. "It's going to take a lot more than some of your cheap tinker toys to stop me, brat," said the demon. With that, a metal sphere with nasty looking spikes appeared in Mara's hand. "But knowing you I thought you might try using your little toys on me. That's why I whipped up this Mara Bomb just for you."

Skuld scowled. Mara Bomb indeed! She'd teach Mara a lesson about stealing ideas from her. "Skuld Attack!" howled the young goddess as she charged the blonde demon. With a quick, fluid motion Mara hurled her bomb at Skuld. That was when Skuld made a critical mistake.

She tried to whack the Mara Bomb with her mallet.

As soon as the mallet touched the metal sphere an electrical crackle filled the air and blue energy surged through the mallet and right into Skuld's body. The little goddess shrieked in pain and dropped her mallet and bomb. Skuld then collapsed to the floor and didn't move.

Mara took a moment to let loose a dark cackle. "Now that I think about it, calling it a Mara Bomb might have been a bit misleading. The term Tazer Sphere is really much more accurate."

While the altercation between Mara and Skuld had been going on Giles had been thinking battle strategy. As soon as the demon had appeared he'd given the teens a quick look. Oz, Willow and Xander had all been in the Scooby Gang long enough to know that look meant 'hold back for the moment'. He'd been hoping they'd find some way to take a measure of Mara's power and come up with some plan to deal with her. Or at least delay her long enough for Buffy and the other goddesses to return. But with Skuld now out of action and possibly injured that was no longer an option. Now was the time for action.

"Get her!" shouted Giles.

Instantly Giles and Oz charged Mara. The demon only took a moment to look annoyed before sending two crackling bursts of energy from her hands. They hit the Englishman and the teenager dead center in their chests. The force of the blasts propelled the two into the wall beside the check-in desk. They then crumpled to the ground unconscious.

Xander, meanwhile, had not been idle. As Oz and Giles had went for Mara he'd made a break for the bookcase. The earthquake had made the storage lockers where Buffy kept many of her weapons a mess and he'd been putting them back in order until he'd been distracted by Willow's arrival. Luckily, that distraction meant the bookcase was still open and unlocked.

As he ran Xander gave a quick glance in Willow's direction and saw that the witch had taken cover under a table and was currently speaking very quickly and making strange gestures with her hands. Whatever kind of spell she was weaving, Xander hoping it would kick in soon.

Once he reached the bookcase the teen grabbed the first weapon he saw. By luck of the draw in was a crossbow. A *loaded* crossbow. While he'd never be able to use the weapon as well as Buffy did, life in the Scooby Gang had given Xander enough experience with the crossbow to the point that he was actually a decent shot. He just hoped decent would cut it right now.

As Xander turned and brought the crossbow to bear on Mara he was surprised to see that the demon had her back completely turned to him. At the moment Mara was taking a second to gloat over the fallen

forms of Giles and Oz.

Not only had this rotten demon hurt Skuld and his friends, but also she didn't even consider Xander enough of a threat to keep an eye on. The dark-haired boy wasn't sure if he should be relieved or insulted. Xander then quickly pushed those thoughts aside and took aim.

"Eat this, demon she-bitch!" yelled Xander as he pulled the crossbow's trigger. With a metallic snap the arrow flew across the library and imbedded itself in Mara's back.

Mara turned from Oz and Giles and looked at the arrow in her back with an expression of mild annoyance. She then pulled the arrow out, broke it in two and casually tossed it aside.

Mara then looked at Xander.

Mara was decidedly pissed.

"So you think I'm a 'demon she-bitch'?" said Mara as she glared at Xander.

Not good! Not good! Xander was in trouble and he knew it. He could only hope to try and stall Mara long enough for whatever spell Willow was still working on from her hiding place to kick in. Or for Skuld's sisters and Buffy to ride to the rescue. Preferably with the entire California National Guard right behind them. But for any of that to happen Xander needed to stall. And Xander Harris knew of only one way to stall.

He babbled.

"I think you misunderstood me. I meant demon she-bitch in the nicest possible way," said Xander. "Why, I hear in France these days 'demon she-bitch' is actually considered quite the compliment. Hey, I bet you get compliments all the time. I mean, a big, powerful demon like yourself--"

"Cut the crap, punk!" snarled Mara. She then took a deep breath to calm herself. The cool and clam way the demon then looked at him scared Xander even more. "So you think I'm a bitch, huh? Well, I've certainly been called worse in my day." Mara's trademark nasty smile then returned to her face. "Why don't I show you how much of a bitch I can be. Better yet, how much of a bitch *you* can be!"

Xander didn't even have time to open his mouth before being nailed with one of the demon's energy blasts and tossed back into the bookcase. He impacted on two of the lockers, which tumbled over onto the teen's prone form once it hit the floor.

Mara was about to go take a look at her latest piece of handiwork when she noticed that her feet were suddenly stuck to the floor. Mara strained a bit but her feet remained in place.

It was then that Willow popped up from her hiding place. "Oh, wow! I can't believe it worked!" gasped the young witch. Satisfied that Mara not a danger for the moment Willow rushed to check on Xander.

She only made it three steps before an unearthly tearing sound reached her ears. Willow turned to see the air around Mara pulsating

with a nasty purple color. Before Willow even had time for an 'Uh oh!' the energy dissipated with a flash. Mara slowly took a step toward the redhead.

"Nice binding spell, kid," complimented the blonde demon. "Very impressive for someone with your current level of magick power, actually. But it's still nowhere near powerful enough to bind a demon first class, unlimited like yours truly."

A burst of crimson energy suddenly flared to life around Mara's right hand. The demon again grinned evilly. "But the sort of stuff you're doing now is just parlor tricks. How about it, Willow? Would you like ol' Mara to show you what REAL magick can do?"

The crimson glow that covered her hand had now found its way to the demon's eyes. Eyes burning with malevolence, Mara reached for Willow.

Willow screamed.

~*~*~*~

In the hall outside the library Buffy watched as Urd and Belldandy continued to pour power against Mara's barrier. The Slayer fingered the stake in her hand and tried to steady herself. Who knew what Mara might have done to the others in the time they'd been trapped in the library with her. Buffy silently swore that if the demon had harmed her friends she'd hunt Mara to the ends of the Earth if that's what it took to destroy her.

"Yo, Slayer, get your head in the game!" shouted Urd. "It's giving way!"

No sooner had those words left the goddess's mouth than a wave of red energy flashed in front of the library doors. The air was suddenly filled with red light and a unearthly ripping sound. The light and sound quickly faded taking the barrier with them.

Buffy instantly charged for the door. Behind her a severely weakened Belldandy moved to follow. She only managed half a step before she stumbled. Urd, herself almost spent, managed to catch her younger sister before she hit the ground.

It was then that the library doors burst open of their own accord. Buffy was barely able to jump back in time to avoid being clobbered. Just beyond the door, her cape flowing in the motion of a phantom wind, stood Mara. "Hello, ladies. It's nice that you could join us, but as you can see the party is pretty much over."

Buffy took a quick second to scan the library. She could see Giles and Oz crumpled against the wall by the checkout desk. Skuld lay on the floor by some tables on the far side of the room. Willow and Xander where nowhere in sight.

Behind the Slayer Urd and Belldandy, now supporting each other, also took in the scene. "Damn you, Mara!" snarled Urd. "If you've hurt Skuld I'll--"

Buffy didn't hear the rest of Urd's threat. She was tuning out all distractions to focus on one thing: the stake in her hand. By Buffy's

assessment Mara was focusing her attention on the goddesses and not on the Slayer herself. Big mistake.

With a movement as fast and graceful as quicksilver, Buffy hurled her stake at the demon and smiled as it hit Mara dead in the heart.

Mara blinked and looked down at the stake protruding from her chest.

Urd and Belldandy gasped.

Buffy opened her mouth to utter a cleaver one-liner.

Mara sighed and calmly pulled the stake from her chest. She then casually tossed it over her shoulder and didn't even blink when the stake suddenly burst into flames. The weapon was ash before it hit the ground.

"Demon first class, unlimited, kid," smirked Mara. "It's going to take a hell of a lot more than a toothpick like that to kill me."

Buffy felt a chill run down her spine. The feeling was identical to how she'd felt just before the Master had plunged his fangs into her neck almost two years ago.

Behind the Slayer Urd muttered a curse. Though she'd never use such language, Belldandy certainly agreed with the sentiment. They both knew that neither of them had the power to deal with Mara and that there was little the Slayer could do to hurt the demon.

Buffy, momentarily shaken by the loss of her stake, now charged now in the hopes of wiping that smile off the demon's face personally. But quicker than Buffy could have ever expected, Mara lashed out with a vicious backhand that caught the Slayer right in the face. The blonde girl sailed backwards and crashed directly into Urd and Belldandy who'd been rushing to assist her. The trio tumbled to the floor in an embarrassing tangle of arms and legs.

In front of the three Mara levitated into the air, her arms spread wide in victory and her cape twirling as if alive. "I can scarcely believe it," said the demon. "The Norns and the Slayer laying defeated before me. And so easily! How you pathetic goddesses keep me down all those years I'll never know.

"But those days are over forever now! Come tomorrow night the world will tremble from my power and every being in Heaven and Hell will know the name of Mara! Nyahahahaha!"

Mara then vanished.

"Overly dramatic much?" muttered Buffy as she and the goddesses began to disentangle themselves.

As it happened it was Belldandy who freed herself first. She instantly sprinted across the library to Skuld's side. She quickly looked her younger sister over and was relieved to see that she was unharmed.

"She okay?" asked Urd as she ran up.

"Yes, Skuld's okay. It looks as though she may have gotten a nasty shock. I'm sure she'll come to in a minute."

As if on cue Skuld suddenly opened her eyes. They fluttered in and out of focus before settling on Belldandy's face. "Oooowww, now I know how Wily Coyote must feel sometimes," moaned the little goddess.

The two elder goddesses just smiled in relief.

Only a few feet away Buffy was occupied trying to rouse her friends. "Giles? Oz? Come on, you two!"

"You stay with Skuld," said Urd as she moved from Belldandy's side. She then moved over the Slayer's side, knelt down and gave Giles and Oz a once-over.

"Looks like a good, old-fashioned bump on the noggin is all they got," diagnosed the Slayer as she gently shook Giles by the shoulder in an effort to wake him. "I just noticed that Willow and Xander are missing. If we're going to find them we'll need Giles and Oz's help."

Urd looked at the fallen men and nodded. "Let me try something." Buffy blinked a few times and moved back. Urd then placed a hand a few inches from the foreheads of the two, closed her eyes and spoke a few words under her breath. As she spoke waves of green energy radiated from Urd's hands and flowed over the two Scooby Gang members.

Moments later Giles and Oz opened their eyes.

"Heh, still a little juice left after all," said Urd with a self-satisfied grin.

"I take it from the jackhammer currently pounding on my brain and the fact that I awoke on the floor as signs that we did not trounce Mara in single combat," said Giles as he wobbled to his feet.

"Good guess," concurred Oz as he shakily stood. Once on his feet the teen musician gave Giles a quizzical look. "'Get her'? You do know how well that plan worked when they tried it in Ghostbusters, right?"

Giles looked mildly embarrassed. "I admit the plan was somewhat lacking in subtly but, well, it was all I could think of at the moment."

Oz gave Giles one of his patented inscrutable looks but said nothing.

It was then that Angel charged into the library. "Buffy!" he yelled.

The Slayer ran over to her former boyfriend to put him at ease. "Angel, it's okay. I'm all right. But Xander and Willow are gone and we have to find them."

"Damn Mara!" growled Angel. "I was coming to see you when she trapped

me in some kind of magical forcefield out in the parking lot. Maybe if I'd been here--"

"You could have gotten your ass handed to you just like the rest of us," interrupted Urd.

Having been so focused on Buffy's safety he hadn't even noticed the newcomers. He mentally chided himself for being so careless. Angel wasn't sure what these women were he was sure it wasn't human. Now that he'd noticed them his vampire senses were prickling in ways he'd never felt before. That was unsettling to be sure, but for some reason he didn't feel threatened by them.

"Sis, is my power on the fritz or am I looking at a vampire with a soul?" asked Urd.

Belldandy looked long and hard at Angel before shaking her head. "No, he really is a vampire with a soul. Amazing. I've never heard of such a thing."

Beside her sister Skuld, who was still a bit woozy, gave Angel a bleary-eyed glance. "Yep, that's a vampire with a soul all right!" Skuld took a moment to congratulate herself on her brilliant deductive capabilities.

Buffy's mind suddenly flashed back to the ease with which Belldandy and Skuld had dusted the vampires in the park. _Better put this potential fire out before it starts_ she thought.

"Okay, the Cliff Notes version is that Angel got his soul back," began the Slayer. "Andâ€|and that's about it."

Urd opened her mouth to say something but Angel cut her off. "Back when I was without a soul I feed on a gypsy girl. Her clan vowed revenge so they placed a curse on me that gave back my soul so I could be tormented over the lives I'd taken. It worked **very** well." Angel then gave the three sisters a quick look. "So, if I may, who or what are you three?"

"They're goddesses," supplied Oz, casually.

Angel took a moment to process that information. He then shrugged. "Goddess, huh? I've seen stranger things in my time."

"Their names are Urd, Skuld and Belldandy," said Buffy as she pointed to each of the goddesses in turn.

Introductions were cut short by a moan from the bookcase.

"Oh my! Someone's trapped under those lockers!" exclaimed Belldandy. Urd somehow managed to contain a remark about stating the obvious.

By then Angel and Buffy were in the bookcase and had just located the victim. With a mild grunt the two lifted the cabinets that were pinning the person.

That was when things got weird.

The person laying on the floor of the library was indeed wearing

Xander's clothes. The person even looked something like Xander. There was just one problem.

The person in question was female.

The girl was a bit shorter than Xander, her hair was same color as Xander's and was cut in a short but stylish manner. Her body was proportionate to that of any normal girl in her late teens. Her features were soft and pleasing to the eye. Truly, if Xander Harris had ever had a sister this was what she would have looked like.

"Whoa," said Oz.

That summed up everyone's feelings pretty well.

While Oz was delivering that brilliant soliloquy, the now female Xander had regained her senses enough to push herself up on her elbows. "Man, did anyone get the license number of that demon? I think I'm gonna sue."

"Xander?" croaked Buffy.

Xander blinked and gave the others a confused look. "Yeah, that's my name, Buffy. Care to tell me whyâ€|whyâ€|uh, why does my voice sound so funny all of a sudden?"

Before anyone could reply Xander began to look herself over for damage. In true teenage boy fashion the two new additions to her chest were the first things she noticed.

"Aaaaaahhhhhh!"

"Well, he seems to be taking it well," assessed Urd. She knew it was a very inappropriate thing to say all thing being what they were, but humor of the situation had overwhelmed her.

"Urd!" snapped Skuld.

"Aaaaaahhhhhh! Aaaaaahhhhhh!"

"Oh, guess he just realized what's missing now that he's a she."

Skuld gave her sister the Look of Death.

"Xander, please calm down," implored Buffy. "I know you have every right to be freaked but you can't flip out now. Willow is missing and it looks like Mara may have taken her."

The Slayer's words were a bucket of cold water for the agitated Xander. The former male nodded, took a deep breath and then, slowly and unsteadily, got to her feet. "Right, right. Gotta focus," said Xander more to herself than anyone. "Worry about saving Will first, then figure out how to get genitals back. Gotta make priorities."

"I know we're all dealing with some pretty heavy weird right now," spoke up Oz "but is it just me or was this thing not here before?" The others turned to see Oz examining a small potted bonsai tree that

was now sitting on one of the library tables.

Once again Belldandy let forth an "Oh my!"

"What? Is it a clue about where Mara took Willow?" said Angel.

"I know I shall soon regret this, but 'Oh my!' what?" asked Giles.

Urd looked at the plant and then back at the Scooby Gang. "Uh, I don't know exactly how to tell you guys this butâ€¦"

"That plant isn't some clue as to where Willow is," took over Belldandy. "That plant is Willow! She's been transformed by one of Mara's curses just like Xander."

For a long moment the room was dead silent. Oz felt the color drain from his face and his stomach suddenly turned to knots. He then focused all his attention on the plant in front of him. "Willow?" he croaked.

Belldandy's heart went out to Oz, but she knew that right now she had to focus on the girl. He divine birthright as a goddess gave Belldandy the ability to sense and see many things that normal humans couldn't. What she saw disturbed her greatly. Secured in the limbs of the bonsai tree, held by bonds of branches, was the spirit of Willow Rosenberg. The spirit had been shrunk to fit within the confines of the tree but other than that it looked just as Willow did. At the moment Willow's spirit was crying and struggling against her bonds.

"Willow, can you hear me?" asked Belldandy as she knelt by the plant.

Willow whipped her head around to look at the goddess, relief flooding her face. "Oh, Belldandy, thank god! I've been shouting and shouting but no one could hear me. I thought I was going to be trapped in this tree forever. Can you please get me out?"

Belldandy swallowed. This news wasn't going to be easy to break. "I'm sorry, Willow, but I'm afraid I can't change you back right now."

"Say what?!" boomed Xander. "You're freakin' goddesses! If you guys can pop out of TVs and fly why the hell can't you turn Willow back!?"

"Calm down, kid!" snapped Urd. "I know all of you are freaked about this and you have every right to be. But if you want to help Willow you're going to have to calm down and listen to us."

Skuld blinked. Urd acting as the voice of reason? She hadn't seen her eldest sister do that sinceâ€¦ever. Just what was going on?

"Urd's right," said Angel. "Loosing our tempers and going at each other only helps Mara in whatever she's up to." He then fixed his gaze on Belldandy. "But, like the others, I would like to know why a being with as much power as you surely have can't help her."

"Think of the spells Mara cast on Willow and Xander as being similar

to an encryption program on a computer," began the goddess. "An encrypted file can't be read unless you have the password. Similarly, we can't reverse the spells these two are under if we don't know the password."

"And there are an infinite number of possible password combinations," added Skuld.

"Let me guess, Mara's the only one who knows the password," said Buffy.

"Bingo," nodded Urd. "But if it's any consolation, Willow can see and hear you while she's like that."

Silence again returned to the library as the latest round of revelations sank in. The silence was shattered moments later by the sound of Xander giving an unlucky chair a brutal kick. The others turned to look at Xander only to see hot tears running down her face. Buffy moved to comfort her friend only to see Belldandy beat her to the punch.

"Xander?" said the goddess quietly. Xander turned her back to Belldandy and said nothing.

"Xander, look at me."

Xander didn't move.

"Please?"

Slowly Xander did turn to face the goddess but refused to meet her gaze. Belldandy put a hand on the girl's shoulder, gave a comforting squeeze and offered her most caring smile. "I know you're upset about what's happened to Willow. More upset about that than what Mara's done to you. You want more than anything to help her but feel powerless to do so."

Xander's head rose to meet Belldandy's eyes. She tried to speak but no words came from her mouth.

Belldandy only continued to smile. "I promise it'll all be okay." She then hugged Xander. The teen froze for a moment, stunned by the gesture of kindness. Xander then hugged Belldandy back tightly.

Wanting follow her sister's kind act Skuld went over to Oz's side, took his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Don't worry, we'll get Willow back to normal. I promise."

Oz turned and looked at the littlest goddess. Since the revelation that Willow had been turned into a tree Oz had felt only numbness. It was as if his heart had been ripped out and this empty feeling was all that was left. But now, somehow, Skuld's small act of kindness had touched him, reassuring him that his heart, at least part of it, was still there. The numbness had eased ever so slightly. And what's more he found he somehow had the faith to believe in Skuld's words.

Oz somehow managed a small smile. "Thanks, Skuld. Thanks a lot."

Just steps away Xander finally let go of Belldandy. She sniffled once, wiped her eyes and smiled at the goddess in gratitude. "Thanks, Belldandy. Damned if I don't feel a little better."

"We will get both of you back to normal," assured the goddess once more.

Xander smiled and gave a little laugh. "Yeah, I know. I don't know how, but I know you will."

"Soâ€¦now what?" asked Buffy.

"Go home," said Giles.

"What?!" gasped Buffy as she turned to face her Watcher. "Giles, did that whack to the head do more damage than we thought or did you just forget that Willow has been turned into a tree and that Xander's now a girl?"

"Not for a moment. But as of right now we are in a very poor position to do much of anything. Though I'm sure you'd all deny it, the emotional trauma of what's happened has clearly taken a toll on all of us. What we need right now is clear thinking and I don't think any of you are up to that right at this moment."

"Giles!" protested Buffy.

It was then that Oz spoke up. "I hate to say it, but Giles is right. I want to help Willow more than anything but right nowâ€¦now I'm just kinda numb. I think I'd just be in the way."

Still bound to the tree Willow felt her heart go out to the man she loved. "Oh, Oz."

"I'm gonna have to go with the G-Man on this one too," said Xander. "Right now curling up into a fetal position is sounding disturbingly tempting. I don't think I'm in any shape to help Will either."

Buffy again opened her mouth to protest but stopped as she felt Angel's hand on her shoulder. "Giles is right," proclaimed the vampire. "If you don't tackle this with a clear head Mara will win. The best thing you can do is go home and try and get some sleep."

"I agree with Mr. Giles too," said Belldandy. "A little time to recover would do all of you some good."

"I think some rest would also be beneficial to you three as well," said Giles. "While much of your nature is unknown to me, it does seem rather clear that the three of you are rather worn as well."

"It galls me to say this, but he's right," muttered Urd. "Mara made all of us exhaust our powers. I don't even have the juice for a simple teleportation spell. If we're going to stop whatever Mara's up to, we're going to have to recharge our batteries first."

"And when did you become Ms. Reasonable?" asked Skuld.

"Zip it, brat!"

"Hey, if you three need a place to crash you can bunk at my house," informed Xander.

"It's nice of you to offer them a place like that, Xander," began Buffy, "but wouldn't those people you live with, the one's called mom and dad, maybe object?"

Xander shook her head. "They're not there to object. Mom and dad had a major blow up last night and mom went to stay with my uncle Roary for a while. And since he has a satellite dish, I don't think I'll be seeing her for at least two weeks."

"And your dad?"

"When I got up this morning he was heading out the door with a suitcase in one hand and a Spanish-English dictionary in the other. I guess he decided to take advantage of mom being gone for a while to head down to Tijuana for a few days of mucho tequila."

Buffy mentally shook her head. How such a good guy as Xander could be the product of two such negligent parents just amazed her.

"Thank you for your kind offer, Xander," said Belldandy. "If you're sure it won't be a bother we'll accept."

Xander shook her head. "Nah, no bother. Besides, it'll give me someone to talk to if the power company cuts off the lights again. Nothing worse than being in the dark and alone."

"What about Willow's folks?" asked Angel. "We can't exactly call them and tell them their daughter's going to be a tree for a while."

"Fortunately, Willow informed me that her parents will be out of town until Monday," replied Giles. "Thank God for small favors, I suppose."

"Uh, guys?" said Oz. "I don't think I'm going to be able to help on this one even tomorrow." He glanced to the tree that was now his girlfriend. "I think I should spend this time looking after Willow. Like Xander said, being alone sucks. And you can't get more alone than being stuck as a tree."

Willow was now crying. "Oz, thank you. I love you."

Belldandy looked from the bonsai tree to Oz. "She said that--"

"I know," interrupted Oz. "On that one I don't need to hear her to know how she feels."

"Now that everything has been settled I suggest all of you head home," said Giles. "I'll just tidy up here a bit and then I'll head home as well. An icepack and a cup of Earl Gray sounds like heaven right now."

"I'll stay and lend a hand," added Angel. "At least that way I can be of some help here."

Who do they think they're fooling? wondered Buffy. She knew that once they were gone Giles and Angel would dive right into

investigating Mara. Angel and Giles wanted to even the score with the demon just as much as she did. Plus, Angel had some previous connection to Mara and who knew what that was about. Buffy momentarily considered pressing the issue of at least herself staying to help. But after a moment's thought decided against it. She felt pretty spent herself and Angel and Giles would likely have better luck finding out more about Mara and whatever her plan was if they weren't worrying about her. Home it was.

"Okay, let's go. But let's try and get back here bright and early tomorrow," said the Slayer. "Oz, can I grab a ride in your van? I don't feel much like walking."

"Sure," nodded Oz as he gingerly picked up Plant Willow. "Xander, you want a ride too?"

"Yeah, thanks." Xander then gave a little bow toward the goddesses and gestured toward the library's doors. "Ladies, your carriage awaits."

With that, Buffy, Oz, Plant Willow in arms, Xander and the goddesses headed for the parking lot.

Giles gave off a sigh of relief. "I suppose we'd best get to work."

Angel nodded. "Right. We've got curses to break and a demon to kill."

**

To Be Continuedâ€¦

**

Author's Notes: I don't really have much to say this time around. Just that this was the part of the story where I finally got to let Mara cut loose. Going into this story, one thing I wanted to do was ratchet Mara up to where she was the equal of any Buffy villain in terms of the amount of havoc and emotional pain she could cause the Scoobie Gang. I'm biased, but I personally think she did pretty well. ;)

—

"Yeah, ol' Tricky Dick was a fun guy," recalled Mara. "Helping out on his reelection campaign was one of the best times I had back in the 70's."

—

Funny thing about Nixon, in the Angel episode "Fredless" Angel remarks that Nixon's Vice President, Spiro Agnew, was a demon of some sort. That's a huge coincidence since I wrote the above line months before that episode aired.

—

It was almost as much fun as when I got to club all those hippies in Chicago back in '68."

—

Mara is referring to the riots that erupted between demonstrators and police at the 1968 Democratic Convention. I've always found that to be an interesting historic event so I decided to toss Mara into the mix. Cops beat the tar out of journalist Hunter S. Thompson and a security guy punched Dan Rather in the stomach while he was on the air live. Just the sort of trouble Mara loves to cause. ;)

—

"By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes," recited the vampire as resumed his walk to the school.

—

That was a quote from my favorite Shakespearean play, Macbeth.

—

"Anyway, now that Belldandy's done playing Mr. Wizard will someone tell me where I can get a drink around here?"

—

Mr. Wizard was the host of Mr. Wizard's World, an educational program that aired on the Nickelodeon network during much of the 1980s. Mr. Wizard, with the assistance of some teen helpers, was always doing cool experiments designed to teach young minds some of the basic principles of science. Just about everyone my age watched and loved Mr. Wizard when we were kids.

"_I've seen every movie John Hughes ever made."_

John Hugh was the writer and director of such classic 80's fare as Ferris Bueller's Day Off, Weird Science, The Breakfast Club and Sixteen Candles among other movies.

—

"Yay, we're going to play 'Where's Waldo?' with some book written before the discovery of America," grumbled Xander.

— —

Where's Waldo? is a series of kid's books where readers tried to find the oddly dressed Waldo somewhere in a large and dizzying crowd.

—

The demon had traded her jacket and pants in for some new togs. Mara's current outfit consisted of black boots with multiple straps and a black leather bodysuit that ran from her boots to her chest. On her chest Mara wore a vest of black leather held together by buckles and straps. The vest also featured two plates of blue metal that served as breastguards. A flowing cape that was black as pitch outside, but was blood red on the interior, set off the whole

outfit.

—

This is the outfit worn by Mara in the "Ninja Master" arc of _Oh My Goddess!._

—

"Skuld Attack!" howled the young goddess as she charged the blonde demon.

—

Skuld yells this out in the OMG story "Meet Me by the Seashore". I thought it was really cute so I decided to use it here.

—

Urd then placed a hand a few inches from the foreheads of the two, closed her eyes and spoke a few words under her breath. As she spoke waves over green energy radiated from Urd's hands and flowed over the two Scooby Gang members.

—

Urd did the same thing for Keiichi in an episode of the OMG OVAs.

—

Truly, if Xander Harris had ever had a sister this was what she would have looked like.

—

The idea for Xander-chan came when I happen to be musing about what might happen if you mixed Buffy with _Ranma ½_. The idea of Xander falling into the Spring of the Drowned Girl, while clearly impractical, stuck in my head. When I was outlining this story it occurred to me that one of Mara's curses could do the exact same thing. Thus, we now have Xander-chan. J

—

Secured in the limbs of the bonsai tree, held by bonds of branches, was the spirit of Willow Rosenberg.

—

The same thing happened to Keiichi's sister, Megumi, when Mara turned her into a car.

**

That's all, folks.

**

3. Long Ride Home

~*~*~*~*~

In a small grove of bushes several blocks from Sunnydale High someone moved. His two upper incisor teeth were fang-like and the person was in a greatly irritated mood. As he moved the branches of the bushes caught on his clothes, causing him to utter a string of course language. With a quick surge of effort the person tore loose from the bushes and tumbled wildly into a patch of grass. He rolled a few times before finally coming to a stop under a sign. The sign read "Welcome to Sunnydale".

The person now lying on the ground was a teenage boy with dark hair. He sported a yellow shirt, dark green pants and a yellow bandanna with black stripes. He also wore a large backpack and had a battered umbrella in his right hand. The young man in question was Ryoga Hibiki a.k.a. The Eternally Lost Boy. In some circles he was also known as P-Chan and, in the mind of one very strange girl, as Charlotte. But both of those were long stories, neither of which he liked to dwell on.

After taking a moment to catch his breath Ryoga sat up and looked around. "Hey, this isn't Tokyo Station! Dammit! WHERE ON EARTH AM I NOW!?" howled the young martial artist in Japanese.

It was then that he noticed the sign. Upon closer inspection Ryoga noted that the poles that held the sign to the ground looked battered and that there was a series of black tire tracks across part of the sign. It had seemingly been run over by a car recently and then hastily put back up. Ryoga mentally shook his head at the carelessness of this city's (whatever city this was) Department of Public Works.

"Hhhmmm, that sign's in English. Maybe this is some sort of resort for tourists coming to Japan." Ryoga moved back from the sign bit and squinted. When one spent as much time lost in various part of the world as Ryoga did, learning to read signs in foreign languages was a vital survival skill.

"Wellâ€¦comeâ€¦toâ€¦Sunnyâ€¦Dale," read Ryoga in heavily accented English. The young Japanese boy scratched his head. "'Sunnydale?' That doesn't sound very Japanese." Ryoga then reached into his pack and pulled out a map. It was at this point that two things escaped Ryoga's notice. First, he was holding his map upside-down. Second, it was a map a Spain.

His confusion growing, Ryoga started studying the map. While he was doing this a third thing escaped his attention. Oz's van, carrying its owner, Plant Willow, the goddesses, Buffy and Xander drove right past him. At the point when the van was about a half block away Ryoga sighed and admitted the inevitable. Once again he was hopelessly lost.

It was then that Ryoga shouted the words that in recent years had become almost a mantra to him: "RANMA, THIS IS ALL YOUR FAULT!"

~*~*~*~*~

Tokyo, Japan

In a small okonomiyaki restaurant in the Tokyo suburb of Nerima, a young man by the name of Ranma Saotome let forth a mighty sneeze.

"Aaachooo!"

Behind the shop's main grill, her mighty battle spatula strapped to her back, the shop's owner, Ukyo Kuonji, merrily prepared another of her delicious okonomiyakis. "Bless you, Ranma," Ukyo said as she added a dash of sauce to the treat. In addition to making the best okonomiyaki in town, Ukyo was also a talented martial artist and Ranma's "cute" fiancée. But that was a long story that Ranma hated to tell since whenever he started to he usually ended up getting a painful crack to the skull with a mallet courtesy of another girl that he was also engaged to. Such was the complicated life of Ranma Saotome.

"You're not coming down with a cold are you?" asked Ukyo as she flipped the okonomiyaki.

"No, I feel fine," replied Ranma.

"Hhhmmm. You know, there's an old folk saying that says when you sneeze it means someone is talking about you."

"Yeah, I've heard that," nodded Ranma. "Personally, I think stuff like that's silly."

Ukyo glanced at Ranma and stopped for a second to admire his dark hair that he wore pulled back in a pigtail and the bright red Chinese shirt he had on. Ukyo mentally smiled. Ranma may have considered her just his best friend at the moment, but one of these days he'd see the light. She took a moment to fantasize about the day Ranma would find a way out of his engagement to that tomboy Akane, send that bimbo Shampoo back to China, and convince the authorities to have that psycho Kodachi committed. Then he'd be all hers just like it should be.

sigh

"I suppose it is a silly idea after all," agreed Ukyo as she seamlessly flipped the okonomiyaki from the grill and onto the plate in front of the hungry martial artist. "Here you go, Ranma honey. One pork okonomiyaki cooked to perfection. On the house, of course!"

"Thanks, Ucchan!" beamed Ranma as he tore into the food. "Mmm! Great like always!"

Ukyo beamed.

As he devoured the okonomiyaki, in the back of his mind a thought tugged at Ranma's brain. _I know all that stuff about sneezing when someone's talking about you is silly, but still, if it were true, I wonder who it could have been._

At that point Ranma's mind gave a mental shrug and returned its full attention to devouring the food before him.

~*~*~*~*~

"Hey, Buffy? Buffy? Buffy, this is Houston calling. Come in Buffy."

The Slayer, who had been peering out the van's back window, turned and flashed a sheepish smile. "Sorry. I thought I heardâ€¦I guess it was a shout back there."

"As long as it wasn't the trademark Sunnydale scream of abject terror I wouldn't worry about it," said Xander. "Besides, it was probably just Oz's muffler howling to be put out of its misery."

Buffy managed a small smile as she sat down on the floor next to Xander. Across from them the goddesses sat talking quietly among themselves. Up front Oz drove with Plant Willow riding shotgun.

"You know, Xander, sometimes you really amaze me," said Buffy.

"Really?"

"Sure. I mean, an hour ago you were a guy. Now you'reâ€¦"

"Playing for the other team?" offered Xander. She then paused for a second to reflect on her words. "Uh, I didn't mean it that way."

Buffy giggled.

"On second thought actually does make sense," Xander continued. "Now that I'm a girl I guess I'm technically a lesbian. Wow, all of a sudden I'm overcome with this urge to go out and buy Paula Cole albums and tickets to Lillith Fair."

Buffy gave another laugh. "Well, lesbian or not you're still you. But considering what's happened I'm surprised you're not doing more of the wiggins."

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little freaked. Okay, a lot freaked," admitted Xander. "Hell, I'm probably the first guy in history to become a woman without flying to Sweden for weird operation first. On the other hand, this isn't exactly the first time I've ended up on the nasty end of some magick. Remember last Halloween when that cursed costume turned me into a GI Joe complete with kung fu death grip?"

"I do remember that, but where was that kung fu death grip when we were being chased by Spike and his goons?"

"The kung fu death grip is a forbidden technique, grasshopper," intoned Xander in a bad Chinese accent. "Besides, the death grip wouldn't have worked on Spike. He's a vampire so he's already dead."

"Good point," sighed Buffy.

"Anyway, I guess that Halloween thing wasn't so bad. I got all that cool military knowledge without having to deal with one of those

Full Metal Jacket type drill sergeants. Shame there wasn't an upside to me being possessed by a hyena spirit or having every woman in Sunnydale fall for me."

Xander paused for a second to reflect on that last memory. "Wait a second, during that whole lovespell mess Amy Madison got jealous of our relationship and turned you into a rat to get you out of the way. So you've been through this cursed thing before. Was being a rat for a few hours really that bad?"

"My memory of being a rat is a bit hazy," admitted Buffy. "But I do recall being really freaked when I realized what had happened. And being really, really freaked when I was turned back and realized I was naked."

"But you were okay after, right?"

"Well, I had this strange urge to gnaw on stuff for about a week after but, yeah, I was cool."

"Okay then," shrugged Xander. "As long as I get back to being a guy before I have to deal with any 'not so fresh feeling' stuff then it's all good."

"'It's all good'?!" repeated Buffy. "There's taking it well and then there's this. That must have been one heck of a hug Belldandy gave you."

As soon as the Slayer spoke those words the humorous, irreverent air that defined Xander Harris evaporated. Xander suddenly seemed solemn and cast a quick look at Belldandy. "Yeah, some hug."

"Xander?" said Buffy.

"I really don't know how to describe it. How it felt when she hugged me. If you took the best hug you've ever had in your life and multiplied it a thousand times you still wouldn't be close. I mean—just for those few seconds I felt totally safe, totally protected and that no matter what everything would be okay. You don't get a lot of those moments in life, Buffy."

Buffy thought back to how she'd felt resting in Angel's arms after they'd made love that one and only time. No, you didn't get many moments like that in life at all.

"I wonder if that's what Lois Lane feels like when Superman shows up and saves her at the last possible second," mused Xander. "It was—Well, it was like being hugged by a goddess."

"Think a hug from a Slayer might help too?" asked Buffy.

Xander smiled. "You never know. But Buffy hugs are always good."

With that, the two friends embraced.

While that had been going on the goddesses had been engaged in a far more serious discussion.

"It just doesn't add up," muttered Urd.

"What doesn't add up?" asked Belldandy.

"Mara. She actually beat us. Hell, she completely kicked our asses. When has that ever happened?"

"Never," said Skuld. "I never would have guessed Mara could do stuff like that. She always seemed kindaâ€¦goofy to me. Bad, but not really a threat, you know?"

"Exactly," nodded Urd. "She's plenty nasty when she's out on her own, but whenever she tries to mess with us for some reason she tends to devolve to the level of some cartoon supervillain. One ridiculous plan to make our lives miserable after another. And in the end she always goes away with egg on her face.

"But not this time. This time she outwitted us and the Slayer and her friends. So the question is what's different about Mara this time that let her get the best of us."

"Wow, that actually sounds logical," replied Skuld. "What's up with you? You never act logical."

Before Urd could retort Belldandy interrupted. "Urd has known Mara longer than any of us and she does raise a good point. Mara did seem somewhat out of character tonight. She was moreâ€¦vicious than I ever imagined she could be."

"Mara's a demon. Vicious comes with the territory," shrugged Skuld. "Maybe she just found some inner well of nastiness we never knew about. Or maybe that Lord of Terror mess made just made her snap. She always did seem a few sandwiches short of a picnic to me."

"Mara wasn't always the way she is now," informed Belldandy. "When she, Urd and I were younger we were actually friends. But once we began to mature and we took on the roles that goddesses and demons do and so we couldn't be friends anymore."

"Yeah, growing up can really suck," sighed Urd. "Anyway, long story short, Mara took to evil like a fish to water and for some reason decided to make it her mission to make life tough for us. Some kind of effort to try and forget the fact that she was once our friend, I guess."

"Do you think she might be under some kind of influence?" asked Belldandy.

Urd shrugged. "Could be. Looks like Mara's behavior is another mystery we'll have to solve. Right up there with what she's up to and what caused that earthquake a few hours ago. Anyway you slice it, something seriously weird is going on in this town."

"I think weird is the standard in this town," muttered Skuld.

Urd and Belldandy nodded in agreement.

~*~*~*~*~*~

A few minutes later Oz's van rolled up in front of the Harris house and Xander and the goddesses quickly climbed out.

"We'll meet you guys at the library tomorrow at 9 a.m., okay?" called Buffy.

"Gotcha," confirmed Xander. "The early bird slays the demon."

Xander then went to the driver's window and glanced past Oz to the seat where Willow lay. "Hang tight, Will. We'll get you back to normal ASAP. In the meantime see if you can figure out if you'd make a sound if you fell in the woods and no one was around, okay? I've heard there're some monks in China who've been working on that one for a while with no luck. Maybe you could help 'em out."

Despite being bound to the bonsai tree Willow still managed a smile. "God, Xander, I don't know how you do it. No matter how bad things are you can always say something funny to make me feel better."

Xander then fixed Oz with a serious look. "Look, Oz, I know things haven't been the best between us latelyâ€¦"

"Water under the bridge, man," assured the teen. "I forgave you and Willow for thatâ€¦uh, thing a long time ago. We're cool, got it?"

"Yeah, I got it," said Xander with a small smile. "Anyway, I meant what I said to Willow. We will get her back to normal. I also wanted to say that I'm glad you're doing what you doing. Will needs someone to be with her now and I can't think of anyone better to watch over her."

"Thanks, man. I know that you've been best friends since you were, like, in diapers so hearing you say that means a lot."

"Back at ya," replied Xander. Xander then glanced over his shoulder to see the goddesses standing a discreet distance away trying very hard not to look at anything in particular for too long.

"I better get going. Stay cool."

"Roger," confirmed Oz.

With that Xander turned and began to walk back toward his house.

"Hey, Xander."

Xander turned.

"Be sure to kick Mara's ass for us," said Oz.

"Promise," nodded Xander as he flashed his friend a thumbs up.

"I promise too," vowed Willow under her breathe.

Despite being a few feet away Willow caught her sister's words. The goddess found them unsettling to say the least. Willow's observations in the library and the van had been right; Willow was acting much more serious than usual. Willow wasn't sure what was causing her sister to act so different, but swore to herself that she

would find out the truth.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

"-was the official response from the White House.

In local news, the mayor's office today issued a statement reporting that the city of Sunnydale suffered no noticeable damage in last night's earthquake. In an early morning press conference at city hall Mayor Wilkins said--"

With a mild sigh Joyce Summers snapped off the kitchen radio and headed for the living room. Ever since meeting him during the anti-occult fever that had swept Sunnydale a few weeks prior Joyce had found herself feeling uncomfortable whenever she so much as heard the mayor's name. Something about him just seemedâ€|creepy to her.

"Living in a town full of vampires is getting to me," murmured Joyce as she sat down on the couch and picked up a cup of tea. "I'm starting to think everyone is a monster."

It was then that she heard the front door open and close.

Setting her tea aside Joyce headed for the hall. "Buffy? Is that you? You're home early tonight."

When Joyce caught sight of her daughter she stopped cold. Physically, she could tell that Buffy was fine at a glance. But her eyesâ€|In her daughter's eyes Joyce saw a look of pain that had become far too common since whatever powers that be had decided that her Buffy, her child, was to be the Slayer.

"Momâ€|" whispered Buffy.

No further words were needed. Joyce dashed toward Buffy and hugged her to her chest. Buffy hugged back. Hard. In that second, just for moment, Buffy Summers stopped being the Slayer. At that moment she was just a teenage girl who needed the love and support of her mother more than anything else in the world.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

It's said that music is a piece of a person's heart given form as sound. In his bedroom, Plant Willow situated comfortably on his bed, Oz was pouring out his heart. Those that knew him called Oz a man of few words. Oz just figured there was no need to use words if you say it with song.

Right now the song he was playing said one very simple thing to the girl who meant more to Oz than anyone.

"I love you too," said Plant Willow, a stream of happy tears rolling down her face.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

In the bell tower of Sunnydale High a figure stood. Bored and impatient, Zack took a moment to glance up at the night sky. It was a half moon tonight. "Appropriate," murmured Zack. "This show is

already half over. Which leaves the finale for tomorrow."

There was then a flash of red light as Wally suddenly appeared in the bell tower, a large white bag under one arm.

"You got it?" asked Zack.

"Yep," nodded Wally as he dug into the bag and pulled out a paper cup with a lid on it. "Lots of cinnamon, lots of cream, just like you ordered. What kind of donut do you want?"

"Gimme one of those deals that's twisted and covered in sugar," replied Zack as he took the espresso cup from Wally. "I'll say one thing for Sunnydale, at least it's not too hard to find a decent cup of java and a donut in this town."

"Yep, it's almost a shame what's gonna happen to this place tomorrow. Almost," nodded Wally as he withdrew a large bearclaw from the bag and took a bite. "Damn, do I love these things!"

"With a gut like yours that comes as such a shock."

Wally, his mouth full of bearclaw, gave Zack the finger as a rebuttal.

"You know, I was real impressed with the butt whippin' Mara dished out here tonight," said Zack.

Wally gulped down the last bit of the food in his mouth, licked his fingers, and nodded. "Yeah, the boss' little puppet really did her job well. I mean, turning that smart mouthed kid into a girl, now that's evil with the sort of creative twist you just don't see much these days."

"I sort of liked what she did to the witch. You turn a girl named Willow into a plant. It's the sort of ironic curse the Greek gods were so big on. Very classic."

"Aw, the Greek gods are such dicks. All that attention they get in Western culture has given them such huge egos."

"The Greek gods have always had huge egos," said Zack. "But they did get even worse for awhile after that _Hercules_ movie that came out not long ago."

"Tell me about," muttered Wally as he pulled a cup of espresso out of the bag for himself. "But at least all the other gods get to give them a hard time over those _Hercules_ and _Xena_ shows. They come off as pretty goofy on there."

"Heh, yeah, that's true."

Zack took a long drink from his espresso and then cast a quick glance at the moon. "Just one more day, my man. Come tomorrow night the boss' plan will be fulfilled and we'll be given the reward we so richly deserve."

"We'll be freakin' kings," grinned Wally.

Zack also grinned and then raised his cup. "To tomorrow then."

Wally grabbed his own cup and raised as well. "To tomorrow."

"Cheers!"

~*~*~*~*~*~

Author's Notes: Not really much to say about this section. I knew it was really, really short, but college was dogging me bigtime so I figured I might as well post something to hold the fans over.

—

The young man in question was Ryoga Hibiki a.k.a. The Eternally Lost Boy.

—

The Ranma $\frac{1}{2}$ references continue. I couldn't resist tossing Ryoga into the story seeing as, with his sense of direction, one could actually believe he could somehow end up in Sunnydale.

—

In some circles he was also known as P-Chan and, in the mind of one very strange girl, as Charlotte.

—

P-chan is, of course, Ryoga's cursed form, a small black pig. Charlotte was the name given to him by the uber-kawaii Azuza from the Martial Arts Figure Skating duo the Golden Pair.

—

It was then that he noticed the sign. Upon closer inspection Ryoga noted that the poles that held the sign to the ground looked battered and that there was a series of black tire tracks across part of the sign. It had seemingly been run over by a car recently and then hastily put back up.

—

This is the Welcome to Sunnydale sign that got trashed before when Spike and Drusilla first come to Sunnydale. The sign received the damage it sports in this story when Spike, sans Dru, returned to Sunnydale in "Lovers Walk" which took place a few weeks before the start of this story.

—

In a small okonomiyaki restaurant in the Tokyo suburb of Nerima, a young man by the name of Ranma Saotome let forth a mighty sneeze.

—

Hey, if I had Ryoga why not Ranma?

—
In addition to making the best okonomiyaki in town Ukyo was also a talented martial artist and Ranma's "cute" fiancée.

—
Ukyo is my favorite Ranma ½ character so I couldn't leave her out. Sorry if anyone out there does like the way Akane, Shampoo and Kodachi are mentioned in this story. I like all the girls fine, but wanted to write them the way I think Ukyo thinks about them.

—
On the other hand, this isn't exactly the first time I've ended up on the nasty end of some magick. Remember last Halloween when that cursed costume turned me into a GI Joe complete with kung fu death grip?"

—
Xander is referring to season two's episode "Halloween".

—
Shame there wasn't an upside to me being possessed by a hyena spirit or having every woman in Sunnydale fall for me."

—
More season two references.

—
Buffy thought back to how she'd felt resting in Angel's arms after they'd made love that one and only time. No, you didn't get many moments like that in life at all.

—
The classic episode "Innocence". Again, season two.

—
Ever since meeting him during the anti-occult fever that had swept Sunnydale a few weeks prior Joyce had found herself feeling uncomfortable whenever she so much as heard the mayor's name. Something about him just seemedâ€|creepy to her.

—
Joyce met the mayor in season three's "Gingerbread".

—
In the bell tower of Sunnydale High a figure stood.

—
The bell tower is where Buffy stopped Jonathan from killing himself

in season three's "Earshot".

4. A Night at the Harris'

Must be the maid's decade off, though Urd as Xander continued the brief tour of the Harris home he'd been giving the goddesses. While the décor of Xander's home wasn't terribly different from the way most middle-class suburban homes across America looked, the carpet didn't seem to have been vacuumed in a dog's age and Urd doubted if much else in the house had had a good cleaning since the Regan administration.

"and that pretty much concludes our tour of Chateau Harris," said Xander as she led the goddesses into the kitchen. "On behalf of the Harris clan we'd to thank you for visiting and remind you that tipping your guide is allowed and encouraged."

"Thank you for showing us around, Xander," smiled Belldandy. "Your home is very lovely."

"Yeah, if you're that family from _Married With Children_," muttered Skuld under her breath.

Urd quickly gave her sister a light smack to the back of the head. Skuld whipped around and glared at her elder sister. Urd just smiled innocently. The little goddess gave Urd a nasty look but kept silent.

"I know we're all very tired but I think it would be best if we all had a little something to eat before we go to bed," suggested Belldandy.

"Sounds good to me," nodded Xander. She then walked over to the refrigerator, opened it and began rummaging around. "Let's see jar of olives expired milk. Whoa! 1991?! How did that happen? uh, leftover pizza some blue stuff that I don't think was blue last week tub of butter some A-1 sauce"

Xander turned back to the goddesses with a sheepish grin on her face. "Let's forget the fridge. Maybe I can show you my mom's famous call-to-the-Chinese-place recipe."

"Oh, there's no need for that," assured Belldandy. "Just give me a few minutes to look around the kitchen and I'm sure I'll be able to find something that will make a wonderful dinner."

"If you do be sure to let me know. I'd like to know where food like that's been hiding these last eighteen years," quipped Xander.

"And that's our cue to exit," cut in Urd. "Come on, kids. Let's leave Belldandy to work her magic."

"Say, Xander, you guys cable?"

"It's the 20th century," replied Xander. "People living in refrigerator boxes have cable."

"True enough," grinned Urd as she headed toward the living room. "I wonder what kind of Mexican TV they get in this burg. The soap operas

from south of the border are just so over the top."

"You know, sometimes I think whoever started calling TV 'the idiot box' was thinking of Urd when they came up with that," sighed Skuld.

Xander choose not to say anything

"Hey, Skuld, check it out! _The Simpsons_ are on!"

"Oooohhh! I love the _The Simpsons_!" squealed Skuld who then dashed into the living room.

Xander paused only to give a mental shrug before joining them.

~*~*~*~*~

Once _The Simpsons_ ended Xander and the goddesses watched the local news in hopes that some story might provide a lead as to Mara's plans. Sadly, the news had proved to only be the usual Southern California brand of murder and mayhem. Once the news ended the three had resorted to the honored American art of channel surfing.

click

"In market news today manufacturing titans Genom Enterprises and Mishima Heavy Industries reported higher than expected earning for this quarter."

click

"Agents Scully and Mulder, FBI."

click

"Our target is the battleship _Nadesico_!"

click

"The year is 2259. The name of the place is Babylon 5."

click

"Ohmigod! They killed Kenny!"

"You bastards!"

click

"Those who have laid eyes on a Gundam shall not live to tell about it."

"Ah, choices, choices," sighed Urd contentedly.

"Put it back on _Babylon 5_!" demanded Skuld. "I like that show!"

"You like B5?" asked Xander. "If you want, later I'll show you my B5 collector plates."

"You have the collector plates?!" gasped Skuld. "I've been looking for those for years!"

"The Almighty save me from the sci-fi geeks," grumbled Urd.

It was then that Belldandy called, "Everyone, dinner is ready!"

Xander and the goddesses quickly abandoned the couch and headed for the kitchen. Once they entered the first thing they saw was Belldandy standing over a large pot on the stove, stirring its contents lightly and smiling. "The kitchen was a bit moreâ€|understocked than I expected. So I was only able to come up with a simple soup. I hope that's all right with everyone," informed the goddess sweetly.

Xander took a deep whiff of the kitchen's air. The smell of cooking meat and vegetables immediately made her mouth start to water. "You made something that smells that good from stuff in *this* kitchen?" said Xander. "You really are a goddess. All hail Belldandy! Heaven's answer to Martha Steward."

Belldandy blushed slightly at the praise.

The dinner table was quickly set and the soup served which all ate with gusto. Xander proved herself a more than capable hostess by recounting some of the adventures she and the other members of the Scooby Gang had shared over the years.

"You're exaggerating!" accused Skuld. "No way was that rat that big!"

"I saw that rat bite a Buick in half," countered Xander. "And it would have done the same to Willow if Buffy and I hadn't stopped it with those battle axes."

Urd shook her head in disgust. "Xander's not kidding, Skuld. Rats can get that big if they're under the influence of a rat demon like Xander was talking about."

"Really?" said the little goddess. "Gross!"

"Actually, the rat demon wasn't all that gross," recalled Xander. "Not in comparison to that cockroach demon we fought last year anyway. Now that was gross!"

"Perhaps we should find something more pleasant to discuss than demons," suggested Belldandy.

"Hey, I know!" exclaimed Urd. "I'll share a few stories about the times I spent hanging out with the Beatles! Those are always a crowd-pleaser!"

"I don't know what crowd those stories would please, but it sure isn't this one," muttered Skuld.

"Oh really?" snorted Urd. "Who's the one who wouldn't shut up for a

week about meeting the guy who played Scotty on _Star Trek_?"

"His name is James Doohan!" blasted the young goddess.

"I knew that," smirked Urd. "I was just seeing if I could get you to cop to be a Trekkie."

"The term these days is Trekker!" blasted Skuld as she slammed her fist on the table.

"Geek," mocked the elder goddess.

Skuld again gave her sister the Look of Death.

It was then that Belldandy said. "Xander, is something wrong?"

Urd and Skuld turned from glaring at each other to see that Xander, instead of looking at them, was staring glassy-eyed at her soup. Once she noticed the goddesses staring at her Xander snapped back to attention. "Uh, sorry about that. I was off in the Twilight Zone for a second."

"Xander, if something is bothering you please feel free to tell us," said Belldandy. "I know we only met a few hours ago but if we can help we'll do so in anyway we can."

Xander was silent for a moment. "Yeah, I know would, Belldandy," she said after a moment. "I still remember what you did for me back at the library. It's justâ€¦all that talking about I did about stuff I did with the others, it made me start thinking about what happened all over again."

"I know you couldn't perceive it, but I could see the condition she was in and I can assure you that, given the circumstances, Willow is holding extremely well," said Belldandy.

"My little sister doesn't lie, kiddo," added Urd. "I saw her as we were getting out of the van and she's hanging in there."

"Actually, it's not Willow I'm freaking about," replied Xander. "She's tougher than even she gives herself credit for. I'm sure she'll be okay with being a shrub for a little while."

"You and her are really close, huh?" asked Urd.

At that Xander smiled. "We've been friends since I can remember. The Dynamic Duo of Sunnydale, Xander and Willow, that was what people called us. Well, that's what I called us. Will kinda asked me to stop doing it once we hit junior high."

For a second Xander's eyes again fell to the soup in front of her. She picked up her spoon and swished it idly in the soup for a few moments. "You know, while I was eating this I remembered something. Freshmen year, before Buffy came to town and we found out that Sunnydale was Hell's 'Welcome' mat, I came down with the case of the flu from, well, hell. I was in bed for eight days getting over it. My folks were always busy with stuff so everyday after school Will would come by with a thermos of soup for me and tell what was going at school. She even put little oyster crackers in the soup. How cool was that? Of course, she also brought me my homework everyday, but I

forgave her for that."

"How very sweet," said Belldandy. "You're very lucky to have a friend like her."

"Don't I know it," nodded Xander. "I wish I'd have told her that more often beforeâ€¦tonight."

Belldandy took one of Xander's hands and gave it a squeeze. "I'm sure she knows. The people we love know what's in our hearts more often than we suspect. The love and friendship between you two is clearly something that doesn't need mere words to find expression."

Xander smiled. "Thanks again, Belldandy. Ever think of hosting your own talk show? Oparh's got nothing on you."

"Pardon my prying, but if it wasn't Willow you're so worried about then who is it?" asked Urd. "Her boyfriend seems to be handling the situation pretty well."

"Oz is a sturdy guy," said Xander. "He'll be okay. The person I'm worried about is Buffy."

"Buffy? Come on, she's the Slayer," said Skuld.

"Exactly," nodded Xander. "Getting smacked around by nasty demons is part of the Slayer job description. Buffy knows that. But having demons lay some wicked mojo down on your friendsâ€¦She's going to have a tough time with that. She's going to blame herself."

Xander chewed her lips for a moment and then stood. "Maybe I should give her a callâ€¦"

"It may not be my place to say this, but I don't think that's a good idea," interrupted Belldandy. "It's rather late and as Mr. Giles said we all really do need some sleep. She might be sleeping right now. And no matter what happens tomorrow, I'm certain that it would be in everyone's best interests to have a Slayer who's ready and well rested."

Xander hesitated for a few seconds. "Yeah, I guess you're right. And if Buffy is having a problem her mom is there. Joyce may not be a Slayer, but she's really strong in her own right. You know, she once whacked Spike, one of the nastiest vamps ever to hit Sunnydale, in the head with an ax. It's just a shame she didn't take that psycho's head off."

"That's it," muttered Urd. "All this angst is givin' me a headache." There was then a small 'pop' sound and Urd vanished. However someone else instantly took her place.

The second Urd vanished a small figure about a foot and a half high appeared on the table in front of Xander. The figure was female, sported red boots, a white dress-like garment with a very short skirt and a large red bow on the chest, long, white silk gloves and a golden tiara. Her hair (or more accurately a cheap-looking wig) was blonde and pulled back into two very long ponytails and two meatball-like buns. The figure also happened to look just like Urd.

"In the name of the Moon, I order you to cheer up!" shouted the mini-Urd.

Xander's jaw promptly fell the floor.

Belldandy looked surprised for a moment then smiled.

Skuld sighed and smacked her forehead. "Great. Urd's dressed up like one of those silly lookin' magical girls from Azabu again. And she's not even drunk this time."

"You heard Sailor Urd! Smile or something, will ya?" called a small voice from the floor beside Xander. The teen glanced down to see another mini Urd, this one dressed in the red a yellow uniform wore by Sunnydale High cheerleaders.

"Gimme an S! Gimme an M! Gimme an I! Gimme an L! Gimme an E! What's that spell? Smile! Smile! Smile!" crowed the mini-Urd as she waved a set of pom-poms.

"Cripes," muttered Skuld. "Urd couldn't be laying it on any thicker if she had a trowel."

"Hush, Skuld," whispered Belldandy as she leaned closer to her sister. "Urd's antics may be a bitâ€¦excessive, even for her, but she's trying to keep Xander's mind off what's happened to his friends. If he starts to dwell on things he might have an emotional breakdown worse than what happened at the library."

Skuld cast a quick look at the two mini-Urds before giving a small nod of understanding.

Just then two more mini-Urds literally danced by. One was dressed in a stylish tuxedo while the other had on a elegant looking evening gown. The two were dancing what Xander vaguely recognized as an old Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers' routine. And doing a good job of it as well.

"You shouldn't worry," advised the Urd in the tuxedo. "We'll find out what Mara is up to a put a stop to it in no time."

"And once we've stopped her we'll force her to turn you and Willow back to normal," added the Urd in the dress.

Xander remained blank-faced for a moment. She then let forth a might laugh and then kept laughing until tears rolled down her face.

"Heh, thanks, Urd," said Xander (once she'd managed to get control of herself again) to the goddess who had by then reassembled herself. "I so needed a laugh right about now."

The goddess smiled. "No problem, Xander. Dr. Urd says that laughter is always good medicine."

"Just don't take any love potions 'Dr. Urd' might try to pass off on you," snickered Skuld. "They're 100% malpractice."

Urd glared at her little sister.

"As entertaining as that was we all really should get to bed now,"

said Belldandy. "We'll need every bit of strength we can get for whatever tomorrow holds."

"Yeah, that little song and dance cost me the last, and I mean very last, of my power," agreed Urd. "I'm ready to saw some logs. So, who's sleeping where?"

"There are only two bedrooms in the whole house," said Xander. "My room and my folks room. And I guess someone could sleep on the living room couch if they don't mind a couple springs jabbing them in the back all night."

"How about Urd and Skuld taking your parents' room, you stay in your room and I'll use the couch," suggested Belldandy. "I'm sure it's not as uncomfortable as it sounds."

"No way am I sharing a bed with Urd again!" yelled Skuld. "I remember how it was last time. She hogs the covers, rolls around all night and snores like you wouldn't believe!"

"I don't snore, you brat!" snapped Urd.

"A chainsaw cutting through a redwood isn't as loud as you!" retorted Skuld. "I'd rather share a room with Xander than you!"

"Which makes me feel oh so wanted," said Xander quietly.

"Skuldâ€|" began Belldandy.

Skuld blinked for a second before realizing what she'd just said.

"Uh, sorry, Xander. I didn't mean it like that."

"It's cool," assured Xander as she waved off the little goddess' comment. "I've got an idea on how we can handle this. Why don't Urd and Belldandy take my folks room. Skuld can have my bed. I'll get my sleeping bag out of the basement and crash on the floor of my room. Is that okay with everyone?"

"I don't know about making you sleep on the floor of your own homeâ€|" said Belldandy.

"Hey, it's okay. You're not only guests but goddesses too. So you get the five star treatment."

"I like someone who knows how to treat a goddess," grinned Urd. "Thanks, kiddo."

"Well, if Xander is sure it's all rightâ€|I suppose we should all be getting to bed then," said Belldandy.

After a few brief 'goodnights' the four headed off to sleep.

**

To be continuedâ€|

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Author's notes: Yeah, I know for all the time between updates this wasn't much to show. But college life eats time the way Homer Simpson

eats donuts. So I would end up not being able to find the right combo of time a willpower to write for sometimes up to three weeks at a time.

Another reason this bit is so short is that I knew I was going to be insanely busy over summer and I wanted to give my readers something to hold them over until I could get more written.

That busy thing isn't some BS I made up to cover being lazy. About two days after I first posted this chapter I left the US for a trip. I was part of an exchange program with my university's sister schools in Asia so I ended up spending five and a half weeks bouncing around China, South Korea and Japan. It was an exhausting trip, but so worth it.

If that wasn't enough, two weeks after I got back from Asia I went to visit relatives in rural Virginia for about ten days. Two days after I got back from that I was off on another trip to Nevada and Southern California. By the time I was done with *that* the fall semester at my university was only three weeks away and I had to start getting ready for that.

Anyway, enough about my life. There really weren't that many Easter eggs in this one. Although I hope you folks enjoyed the references to various American shows.

BTW, I can tell you for a fact that The Simpsons is popular in Japan, so there's no reason to think that Urd and Skuld wouldn't be fans. I actually saw TV commercials featuring drink holders shaped like Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa and Maggie when I was in Tokyo. FYI, the product they push, a drink called C.C. Lemon, is very tasty.

Anyway, the other in-jokes here were all in the channel-surfing section. The stock market report hinted at All-Purpose Cultural Catgirl Nuku Nuku and Bubblegum Crisis respectively. It's your choice if it was the BGC OVAs or the TV series. Also referenced were The X-Files, Martian Successor Nadesico, Babylon 5, South Park and Gundam Wing in that order.

Oh, and Xander being a Babylon 5 fan isn't something I tossed in just because I'm a fan of the show. Him owning B5 collector plates was mentioned in an episode of Buffy, though I just can't recall which one.

5. Ducks in a Row

"Not bad," assessed Mara as she looked about her surroundings. Candelabras, freshly lit, gave light to the cavernous room that decades ago had once been part of a church. "The Master had fairly good taste as far as lairs go for a vampire."

Mara gave an approving nod before dropping herself into the chair that had once been the Master's throne. "I rather liked the look of that castle out by the sea, but the irony of setting up shop in the home of the vampire that killed the Slayer is too much to pass up." Mara then blinked and scratched her head for a second. "Say, who would go and build a big, Gothic-style castle in a town like this anyway?"

Mara's musings where suddenly interrupted by the sound of movement coming down a nearby tunnel. The demon steeled herself in case it was trouble, but relaxed when she saw who it was. Six vampires, two females and four males, emerged from the tunnel, stopped and cast wary gazes at the demon.

"Ah, the minions promised by Mr. Trick are here. All right, which one of you is in charge?" asked Mara.

"That would be me," said a female vamp with long, dark hair and what sounded to Mara like an Australian accent.

"You got a name?"

"Sydney," replied the creature.

"Oh, I get it," said Mara. "You're from Australia and your name is Sydney. How very cute."

"I'm not from damned Australia!" howled Sydney. "I'm from New Zealand!"

"Boy, the new girl is really psycho," muttered one of the other vampires. His comrades nodded in agreement.

Mara was seriously beginning to think that Mr. Trick and given her sub-par henchmen but wasn't ready to admit that yet. "So if you're name is Sydney why did your parents--"

"Because they were bloody stupid!" The vamp then grinned to herself. "They were especially bloody after I tore out their throats."

Mara took a moment to process that and then smiled. "You got moxy, kid. I like that."

"Mr. Trick said you've got something brewing and that we're to help you," said Sydney. "So what's the plan?"

"So glad you asked!" informed Mara as The Big Pop-Up Book of Apocalyptic Magick materialized in her right hand. "You see, kids, this book here is full of all sorts of spells that are just tailor-made to cause chaos and havoc on a worldwide scale. Now what most people don't understand about the universe is that it all comes down to math."

"That's a math book?" asked another of the vamps.

Mara gave the creature a withering look. "Speak when spoken to, fangface. As I was saying, at its most basic level the universe operates on a series of mathematical principles. EMC2 and such. In this book is a spell that can reach down to that level and cause a disruption. This disruption, called a 'chaos burst', will temporarily send the laws of probability out of whack."

"And that will do what?" quizzed Sydney.

"It's more like what it won't do," grinned Mara. "You see, nothing is truly impossible. Just extremely improbable. Start messing with the laws that control probability and anything could happen. Earthquakes

in places with no fault lines, hurricanes and tornadoes appearing from thin air, pregnant women giving birth to snakes, people suddenly going blind or deaf without cause, the economies of entire nations going belly up and all sorts of other fun things. Hell, if we're lucky a few wars will break out."

"But won't that mess up Sunnydale too?" asked Sydney. "The Mayor wouldn't like that."

Mara made a dismissive gesture. "With a few modifications the spell will spare this town any serious harm. Sunnydale will be the eye in Mara's hurricane of chaos."

"So what do you want with us?" demanded Sydney.

Mara reached into a fold in her cape and tossed a scroll in the lead vampire. "That's a list of things I'll need to do the ritual to unleash my spell. Normally I'd handle such an important task myself, but there are other factors in this game that require my personal attention. All you lot have to do is get what's on that list and have it back here tomorrow night. Think you can handle some grocery shopping?"

"No problem," assured Sydney with a small bow. "Come on, guys. We're off to raid The Magic Box."

"Soon to be under new management. Again," snickered one of the vamps as he put on his game face and licked his fangs.

With that, the vampires left.

"I wonder if calling in outside contractors was such a hot idea after all," wondered Mara aloud as she watched them leave. The demon then shrugged. "Oh well. Now it's time to pay a visit to another old friend."

"Mortality sucks," muttered the young woman who called herself Anya as she walked down one of Sunnydale's streets. "Back when I was a demon I got to spend my time exacting terrible vengeance on the males of this world. Now I spend my time worrying about things like algebra class, money, laundry and bed head. It's so unfair!"

"Mortality's a bitch and then you die, huh?" called a voice from behind the girl.

Anya turned to see Mara leaning casually against a lamppost. "Hey, Anyanka. Long time no see."

"Mara!" grinned Anya. "Wow, it's been ages! I haven't seen you since!"

"It was 1951," supplied Mara. "You made a colony of fire ants appear under the skin of some Italian guy who was cheating on his wife. After he was done tearing most of his flesh off we went out to a bar in Milan and got totally trashed."

"That's right," nodded Anya. "Ah, the tormented screams of unfaithful men. Damn, I miss the good old days."

"I bet you do, Anyanka," replied Mara with a smirk. "Oh, wait, its

just Anya these days, isn't it? You lost your little amulet and your license so now you're stuck as a mortal, aren't you?"

"Yeah, and let me tell you it's terrible. I'm still going though vengeance withdrawal," whined Anya.

It was then that Anya's face brightened. "Say, Mara, ol' pal, you've got a lot of connections, don't you? I've been trying to be my powers back but haven't had any luck. And what with us being old friends and all I was hoping you could do me a little favor and--"

"Forget it," interrupted Mara.

Anya blinked several times. "What? Why won't you help me? I thought we were friends!"

"I suppose your definition of 'friend' is deferent than mine," said Mara. "Yeah, we hung out together once in a while, had a few good times but that's it. I mean, it's not as if someone such as _moi-mÃame_ would ever be real friends with a wannabe like you."

"Wannabe!" flared Anya.

"That's right, a wannabe!" retorted Mara. "You were just another pissant mortal till you turned your boyfriend into a troll. A nice spell, I'll grant you, but it wasn't what any real demon would call spectacular. But that little trick was enough to convince D'Hoffryn, Mr. Low Standards himself, that you had the chops to be a vengeance demon."

"I was a great vengeance demon!"

Mara smirked again and began to idly toy with a lock of her hair. "Oh, you were a creative little demon, I'll give you that. You took those second-class limited powers he gave you and used them well. But that still doesn't change the fact that unlike me, a pureblooded demon, you were once a weak little mortal thing."

Anya glared at Mara. "So what if I was once mortal? For over eleven hundred and twenty years I carried out my duties as a vengeance demon and I did my job damn well!"

"Is eleven hundred and twenty years and some change supposed to impress me?" asked Mara. "Little girl, I've around longer than you can imagine. I knew that from the moment I met you you'd blow it one day. Those times I saw you making cow eyes at that arrogant, overexposed, pretentious, Eurotrash, pretty boy Dracula only reinforced that belief."

Anya chewed her lip a bit but stayed silent.

"In the end I was right, wasn't I?" quizzed Mara. "The source of your power was destroyed, you failed in your attempt to get it back and D'Hoffryn abandoned you. Now you're just another zit-poppin', MTV-watchin', brainless, mortal teenage girl!"

Anya scowled. "Some friend you were."

"Hey, I'm a demon. Betrayal and back-stabbing are part of the job,"

shrugged Mara. "Fun parts."

"So did you come here just to kick me when I'm down or did you come for something else?" demanded Anya.

Mara conjured up yet another of her nasty grins. "Actually, kicking you while you're down was just a bonus. But the reason I came here was to do you a favor."

"A favor?" said Anya as she narrowed her eyes and tried ignore the chill that had suddenly ran down her spine.

"That's right. While we may not have been friends I do have some nostalgia for the old days. So with that in mind I decided to give you a little warning. If you're smart you'll pack a bag, blow town, find a little bunker somewhere and settle in for a while. I've got something in the works that'll knock this planet on its ear. If you don't want to get caught in the crossfire now would be real a good time to lay low."

Anya felt her stomach tie itself into a knot. She'd known Mara long enough to know that when she used that tone of voice that the demon wasn't playing around. "Really? Just what are you planning?"

"A good magician never reveals her secrets," replied Mara. As if to emphasize her point the demon suddenly made a black magician's hat appear in her hand.

Anya looked at the hat and gulped.

Mara saw the look on Anya's face and smiled. _This is gonna to be sweet_, Mara thought.

"Presto!" cried the blonde demon as she reached into the hat and pulled out a cute, white rabbit by its ears.

Anya stared at the rabbit.

The rabbit stared at Anya.

"What's up, Doc?" chuckled Mara.

"B-bu-bu-bunny!" screamed Anya. The ex-demon then turned and ran screaming down the street as fast as her legs would carry her.

Once Anya was out of site the rabbit disappeared from Mara's hand in a small puff of smoke. The demon then gave her wrist a little flick sending her top hat rolling neatly up her arm. When it reached her shoulder she gave it a little bounce, which caused the hat to go into the air, flip and land neatly on the demon's head. "Its moments like that that remind me of just how much fun evil is."

Smirking, Mara continued to look in the direction Anya had run. "Run far and fast, ya little wannabe! Maybe I do have some nostalgia for the old days, but that's not enough to help a second-rate ex-demon like you.

The only reason I even bothered with you is because you're on somewhat good terms with the Slayer and her crew now that you're mortal. I couldn't take the chance that they might try and get

information about me out of you. After all, Urd knows we used to hang out. While she likely doesn't know about you getting fired those kids do. No point in taking the chance of them putting those two bits of information together."

Mara made her hat vanish and then cracked her knuckles. "Now that that's out of the way I think it's time I made a little home visit to a certain Slayer."

Mara then vanished.

It looked like any other sleazy motel room in the world. There were clothes tossed on the floor, bits of food, mostly cold pizza, sat around growing mold and the air smelled of old cigarettes and other even less pleasant odors. Only the presence of two things helped the room in any way. One was a small, but rather nice-looking, radio/CD player that sat on a table amid two stacks of CDs and a few bags of junk food.

The other thing was the beautiful, longhaired girl currently sleeping in the room's battered bed.

Mara took all of this in with a glance as she appeared silently in the room. "Yeesh, what a dump. I've seen parts of Hell that weren't as unpleasant as this place. And they smelled better to boot."

After checking to see that the girl was still sleeping Mara decided to poke around the room a bit. The first thing that drew her attention was the radio/CD player and the stacks of CDs by it. "Hhhmmm, that's a decent piece of electronics there. It's a shame this girl doesn't have better taste in music that go with it," muttered Mara as she glanced at the titles of the CDs. "Most of this seems to be that crap ravers listen to."

Mara suddenly smiled as she saw the name of the band on one of the CDs at the bottom of a stack. "Ah, _Aerosmith_! I guess this girl has at least some taste."

"Hey, how can a girl not listen some of her hometown's boys who hit it big?" said a voice with a pronounced Boston accent.

Mara calmly raised her hands and slowly turned around. Mentally she gave a little smile.

Behind Mara, now fully awake and with a stake in each hand, stood the Slayer known as Faith. "Consider yourself lucky, lady. Since I was having a nice dream before you came in here, I'm gonna give you few seconds to explain who you are and what you're up to before I get all John Woo on your obviously demonic ass."

"And just what makes you so sure I'm a demon?" asked Mara coyly.

"You got in here without making sound, you've got some weird tattoos on your face and you make my that's-an-evil-thing-that-I-might-want-to-look-into-killing-senses go all tingly," replied the Slayer. "That good enough, Ms.Gonna-Be-Dead-If-She-Don't-Start-Talking?"

_She can see my demon marks? I guess the enhanced senses of a Slayer

shaper than I remembered_, mused the demon to herself.

"Peace out there, Slayer," said Mara. "Believe it or not, I'm not here to hurt you."

"I choose 'or not'," replied Faith. "Now you got five seconds to say something that'll impress me or I'll use these stakes to make you into a kebob."

"Okay, okay, I just wanted to sayâ€¦" began Mara.

Faith's eye's narrowed. "Say what?"

"SWEETS DREAMS!" howled the demon. Then, again with incredible speed, Mara brought her right hand up to her face and blew a puff of air across the flat of her palm. From the demon's hand came a cloud of yellowish dust that hit Faith right in the face. The Slayer stumbled back coughing.

"Dammit! **hack** what did **cough** you do to **gasp** me, you bitch?" demanded Faith in-between coughs.

"Like it?" smirked Mara. "That's magic sleep sand that I stole from a sandman. Lemme tell ya, sister, that's no easy task. Even to a demon like myself sandmen are little more than the whisper of a shadow. Lucky for me I happened to find a sandman who was a bit careless one day. I stole his sleep sand and he was severely punished by his master, Morpheus, the god sleep."

Though still short of breath, Faith rallied her remaining strength and charged. Still smirking, Mara used her amazing speed to block the Slayer's first attack with her right forearm. Then, before Faith could counter, the demon slammed her left fist into the dark-haired girl's stomach.

Faith fell to her knees coughing and gasping again. But now her eyes were beginning to go in and out of focus and there was a painful sluggishness to her movements.

"Damn you," cursed the Slayer.

Mara narrowed her eyes at Faith glared. "I'm a pureblooded demon, kid. I've got hellfire in my heart and brimstone in bones. I was born damned."

Faith opened her mouth as if to retort, but then she simply closed her eyes and fell over.

Mara then waved a hand over the fallen girl and Faith's body suddenly rose off the ground and into the air. Faith then floated over to her bed where she suddenly fell, almost bouncing off the mattress.

Mara strolled over to the side of the bed and looked down upon the defeated Slayer.

"So easy," smiled the demon.

"You know, kid, you actually pretty lucky," said Mara. "I gave that other Slayer and her pals a knockaround they won't forget anytime soon and I could have done the same to you."

Mara's grin got a bit bigger. "I could, but I didn't. I didn't because you're not like them. Yeah, you're a Slayer, but you're also a bad girl. You see the kind of happy lives that Buffy and her friends lead and a part of you just wants to destroy that. After all, why should they get to be so happy when your life has been so rough?"

Mara leaned down and looked at Faith's face very closely. "You and I have more in common than you'd ever guess."

"But that's not important right now," continued Mara. "What is important is that sleep sand I hit you with. You see, not only does it put people to sleep, but it can also be used to implant hypnotic suggestions."

Mara reached into the interior of her leather jacket and pulled out a sheet of bright green paper that she tossed onto the sleeping girls' chest. "That's a flyer for a big rock festival that's happening down in San Diego this weekend. Now listen carefully, girl. When you wake up in a few hours and see that the only thought that's going start running in your head is finding a way to get down there and having one hell of a good time."

Mara took a second to wipe a stray lock of hair from her eyes. "You'll get to party and I won't have to worry about you helping Urd and company interfere with my plans. It's win-win for both of us, kiddo."

Mara threw her head back and let out a burst of staccato laughter.

The demon then took another look at Faith. "Once this is all over, kid, I'll come back and check on you sometime. A girl with as much power and anger as you could do a lot of damage in this world. I think I might just be the demon to help you down that path. If you don't go that way on your own anyway."

"Turning a Slayer to evil. Oh, what a feather in my cap that would be," mused Mara. In the bed Faith twitched and a frown briefly appeared on her face. Whatever the Slayer was dreaming of it wasn't pleasant.

"Now that that's done, it's time for a little mad science!" chuckled Mara as she vanished.

Computers, both desktop and wall-size lined the room while technicians in white lab coats constantly scurried about. To the uninformed the place could have been mistaken for an ordinary research lab. But this was no ordinary research lab. It was in fact the main research room for the covert government program known as the Initiative.

None of this impressed Mara as she materialized against a wall. Thanks to yet another of her concealment spells no one noticed the demon's arrival. As she looked around the room, an older woman with distinguished features and a strong air of authority caught Mara's attention.

Dollars to donuts, I'll be she's the one in charge here, mused

Mara.

"Sutton, what's the latest on 314?" said the woman to one of the technicians.

"Bad news, I afraid, Dr. Walsh," replied the bespeckled man. "We've tried everything we can think of, but 314 is rejecting the transplant from Subject P27. Their respective biologies are just too incompatible."

"Dammit!" cursed Walsh. "All right, move on to Subject D95. We may have better luck with it. And have some fresh X-rays taken of the right arm. I want it replaced as soon as possible. The current one is just tooâ€¦human."

"I like that attitude," mused Mara to herself. "She has a real Joseph Mengela air to her."

It was then at a young, handsome man dressed in a soldier's uniform entered the room, a clipboard under his right arm. "Excuse me, Dr. Wash," said the soldier. "Dr. Angelman asked me to deliver this to you."

"Ah, thank you, Riley," replied the scientist as she took the clipboard. "I just hope it's good news. I could use some right about now."

"I don't know what's on that clipboard, but I can tell you that your bad news has just started," chuckled Mara. With that, the demon reached into her jacket and withdrew what seemed like a red can of soda. The words 'Mephisto Cola! Now with 40 More Black Magic!' were written on the label.

Mara popped the tab and took a quick swig from the can. "Mmm, that extra black magic tastes so good!" grinned the demon as she licked her lips. "Human's would just eat this stuff up if they ever marketed in here. Just a mouthful would be enough to turn them into a pile of green goo, of course, but good judgment has never been one of humanity's strong points."

Mara then took the can and causally pored the contents onto the keyboard to a nearby computer. Almost instantly the computer's screen went black. Moments later the machine began to make a horrible electronic noise. The noise grew louder and louder and then the machine began to shoot off sparks.

A few seconds later another computer in the room began to do the same thing. And then another, and another and anotherâ€¦

"What the hell is going on!" shouted Dr. Walsh as the lights in the room suddenly began to flicker.

"I don't know, but I'll try and find out," assured Riley evenly. The soldier then grabbed the walkie-talkie on his belt and began to shout into it. "Graham, Forrest, Mason! Get your gear on and meet me at Blue 4. We've got to make sure that the containment cells hold!"

"We're already on our way!" replied the voice of Graham.

"Roger, over and out," confirmed Riley as he charged out the door.

Mara watched as the technicians scrambled about frantically trying to determine what was going on while Dr. Walsh shouted orders. "Fun just doesn't begin to describe this. The taxpayers of this country would be ashamed if they knew their government's best computers go crazy if someone spills a little soda on them," mused the demon.

Still invisible to all around her Mara strolled up behind Dr. Walsh and watched as the scientist continued to shout orders. "Relax, Marie Curie. Ol' Mara isn't going to do anything that would permanently shut down this little shop of horrors. Nobody loves a time bomb just waiting to go off like I do. This place will be up and running again in, oh, five weeks. Six tops."

Dr. Walsh screamed and dived for shelter under a desk as a nearby light fixture exploded, sending sparks and bits of hot glass everywhere.

"You know, the Russians had a place a lot like this back in the early 80s," continued Mara, more to herself than anyone. "They were trying to create an army of unkillable demon soldiers to replace their nuclear program. They'd made some pretty good headway until they decided to let a pair of Kalgor demons they had mate. What the Russkies didn't know it that Kalgors are part insect. The female gives birth to hundreds of young at once. And when little Kalgors are born they tend to eat anything and grow insanely fast.

Not only did the Ivans end up having a lot of their best minds turned into baby Kalgor chow, they also lost two divisions of the Red Army keeping the things confined to the base long enough for someone in Moscow to activate the place's self-destruct system by remote. But, hey, that's life, isn't it?

The blast did kill all the Kalgors in the end. It also killed the soldier's who were fighting to keep the demons from escaping too, but most them had already been eaten by then so I suppose it really wasn't that big a sacrifice."

Mara closed her eyes and concentrated. "But you folks have something far more interesting around here than some Kalgors, don't ya? I think I'll just have a peek."

Mara then vanished.

Klaxons blared and reddish emergency lighting flickered on and off as Mara appeared in another part of the Initiative's base. The room was empty of its normal contingent of technicians. They all had bigger fish to fry at the moment. But the large tank with the number 314 painted on the side sat unchanged and oblivious to the chaos surrounding it.

"My, my, that's a big piñata. Let's have a peak at what's inside. Somehow I don't think its candy," said Mara she stared at the tank. The demon then reached into her jacket and pulled out an odd-looking pair of glasses that had a spiral pattern on the lenses. "X-ray specs, the real deal! Comic book geeks of the world, eat yer hearts out!" chuckled Mara as she slipped on the glasses and looked at the tank.

Inside 314 was a being unlike any Mara had ever seen. The creature was part human, part demon (actually part several different demons) and part machine. Though the thing didn't move Mara could sense great power emanating from the creature.

"Well, aren't you just the cutest little chimera ever?" asked Mara as she floated closer to the tank. "And the power coming from youâ€¦human, demonic, mechanical and nuclearâ€¦oh, it just sends a shiver down my spine. I can just tell that you're going to go Frankenstein someday. And when you doâ€¦mmm, the destruction is gonna be suh-weet!"

Mara then placed the tips of her three largest fingers against her lips, kissed them and then put her hand to the side of the tank. An image shaped like a kiss appeared on the side of the tank, flared bright red for a moment and then disappeared.

"That was a special little blessing from your truly, my little patchwork man," informed Mara as she stowed her glasses. "Just a little something to help you when your time comes. And when your time comes here's some advice; hit your enemies where they're weakest. Hit their emotions. Pervert and twist that which they care about and let nothing stand in your way."

Mara floated away from the tank but blew a final kiss as she went. "See ya, handsome. My time is now, but yours will come soon enough. If I have the time I'll drop by and see what you're up to personally. Dream of the chaos you and I could create while you sleep. _Adios_!"

With those words Mara vanished. The creature in the tank, called Adam by the woman who'd created him, lay silent.

And thenâ€¦

Just for a second Adam's right hand twitched. And just as quickly Adam was still again.

Then Adam began to dreamâ€¦

Sitting in his office, the mayor hummed a little tune to himself as he scrawled his signature on some paperwork. As he worked the mayor's mind briefly did a review of his day. There'd been a meeting with the city council, an interview for local television, some elementary school children dropping in during to a tour of city hall, three blood sacrifices to a variety of demons and his meetings with Mr. Trick and Mara. Yes indeed, it had been a busy day.

But there was one final bit of business before the day was over.

As he finished signing the last paper on his desk Wally and Zack appeared in a flash of red light before the mayor. "Ah, gentlemen, right on time I see. Good, good. Punctuality is such a lost art these days," greeted the demonic politician.

"Our boss expects the best from us," informed Zack simply.

The mayor nodded politely but kept most of his attention on the black briefcase Zack currently held.

"Mr. Trick has already been compensated for his role in helping our boss' agenda come to fruition. We even gave him a bonus for the short notice. Now, as agreed, here's your reward for your assistance in this endeavor," said Wally.

With those words Zack set the briefcase on the mayor's desk, popped it and stood back as the mayor reached inside. Quickly the mayor withdrew with a book with a demonic face as the main feature on its black cover.

"_Necronomicon Ex Mortis_, the Book of the Dead," grinned the mayor as he examined his prize. "Thousands of years old, bound in human flesh and inked in blood. Crammed to the gills with bizarre funeral rights and demon summoning rituals. You won't be seeing this on the self next to the _Harry Potter_ books at Barnes & Noble."

"I should think not," grunted Wally. "We had to go all the way to Arkham, Massachusetts to steal that thing from Miskatonic University. That was no mean feat, let me tell you."

"I'm sure you did your employer proud," said the mayor. "I know no questions asked was part of our bargain, but I'll admit I'm curious as a kitten to know what you boys are helping cook up."

"All things come to he who waits," replied Zack. "Now if there's nothing elseâ€|"

"No, no, you boys run along," dismissed the mayor. "This book will be very helpful in taking care of some of the final details of my Ascension so I want to get to reading it right away. If I can be of any more help you know where to find me."

Wally and Zack nodded and then disappeared in a flash of red light.

Once again alone the mayor opened the Necronomicon and began to read.

"Now let's seeâ€|if I'm reading this map right I should be right by Furikan High School. That means the Tendo Dojo is nearby!"

Those hopeful words belonged to Ryoga Hibiki who, in defiance of the odds, had somehow managed to stay solidly in Sunnydale for the last several hours instead his usual habit of taking a wrong turn and somehow ending up in Uruguay. Sadly for Ryoga he was still very, very far from the Tendo Dojo. But he was near a high school (inside one, in fact). But it wasn't Furikan High.

Thanks to the still unknown properties of the Hibiki directional sense, Ryoga somehow found himself stepping out of Giles' office and into the main library of Sunnydale High. He looked once more at the map in his hand (currently a map of Indonesia) and then looked up to see that he was, in fact, not at Furikan high.

Ryoga was about to scream his trademark accusation of blame on Ranma Saotome when something caught his eye. It was Giles, his head down on one of the library's tables sleeping. Spread out before the Englishmen were nine volumes of demon lore all open to various pages. Hanging partially from his body was a utilitarian-looking blue

blanket.

Giles was snoring softly.

"No, I don't think this is Furikan High. I'm pretty sure even the nutty principle they have there isn't in the habit of letting foreigners sleep in the library," muttered Ryoga as he quietly strolled over to where Giles was sleeping. The young martial artist briefly considered waking the sleeping man to ask for directions but quickly discounted the idea for several reasons. For one, waking a sleeping stranger seemed pretty rude. Two, the odds that the stranger knew where the Tendo Dojo was a longshot at best. Finally, the man looked extremely tired.

"Looks like you've had a hard day, pal," commented Ryoga as he looked Giles over. "Believe me, I know what that's like."

Ryoga's gaze then fell on the occult books on the table in front of Giles. "Wow, I guess you're a big horror fan. Let me tell you about some of the stuff I've been through sometime. Thanks to that jerk Ranma I've seen hell. Um, in the figurative sense."

Giles continued to sleep, unaware of the young man beside him.

Ryoga sighed, reached over to the blanket that had been covering Giles and pulled it back up over the librarian. "Sleep tight, mister. From the look on your face I'd say you've earned a rest."

With a small nod Ryoga left Giles' side and headed out of the library to who knows where.

Some hours later Sunnydale had settled into its usual late Friday night pattern. Those on third shift toiled away, while other people slept or partied and a few unfortunate souls fell victim to the various menaces that prowled the city.

Skuld, however, was doing none of those things. Instead the little goddess sat in the Harris' kitchen, a half-eaten bowl of vanilla ice cream to one side and a large pile of comic books on the other.

"Wow, lightweight but highly aerodynamic and protective armor, HUD displays, various sensor system, boot jets and palm-mounted repulser beams. This Iron Man guy is just the coolest!" smiled Skuld as she read one of the comics.

"Yeah, ol' Shellhead is pretty darn spiffy," replied a voice. "But personally I always preferred Spider-Man. For me, a guy like Peter Parker is much easier to relate to."

Skuld looked up to see Xander standing in the kitchen's doorway, a slight smile on her face. "Oh, Xander, hi. Sorry about borrowing your comics without asking. It's just that I woke up andâ€¦|didn't feel like going back to sleep right away. I was trying to think of something to do so I wouldn't be bored when I spotted a box of comics in your room. So Iâ€¦|"

"It's cool," assured Xander as she sat down at the table and glanced at the pile of comics by Skuld. "Comics were meant to be read, not kept in boxes. Let's see what ya got hereâ€¦|_Gen13_, _Nightwing_,

Preacher "uh, you're a little young for that one" _JLA_, _Flash_, _Avengers_, _Fantastic Four_, _DV8_, _Starman_, _Generation X_, _Robin_, _Thunderbolts_, _The Authority_, _Supergirl_, _Green Lantern_, _X-Men_ and, of course, _Iron Man_. Hey, you got good taste."

"Uh, thanks," said Skuld. "So what are you doing up?"

"Nature called," shrugged Xander. "And now that I'm a girl that's a whole new ride. But the less said about that the better. But, uh, using the bathroom isn't the only reason I'm up."

"Bad dream?" ventured Skuld.

Xander nodded. "And I'm not the only one am I?"

Skuld froze for a second and then nodded. "Yeah, me too. How could you tell?"

"Sunnydale is where all the thing that people though lived under their bed really do live. Living in a place like this you learn a lot about nightmares. You wanna talk about it?"

Skuld shook her head "Not really."

Xander frowned briefly. "Look, Skuld, I know you just met me but you can talk to me if you want. I've seen what happens when people keep what they're feeling bottled up and trust me it's not pretty."

Skuld's face softened a bit but she said nothing.

"How about if I tell you what I dreamed about and you tell me what you dreamed about. Sound fair?"

Skuld hesitated for a moment and then nodded.

"Well, to understand my dream you gotta know about something that happened a few years back," began Xander. "I had a major crush on Buffy but she was all about the posterboy for Ann Rice-style whiny vampires AKA Angel. So I sorta "blackmailed" a witch girl that I knew into casting a love spell on me. It was supposed to make Buffy find me totally irresistible. Unfortunately the spell didn't work exactly right and pretty soon everything I met that didn't have a Y chromosome was after me."

"Wow, a screwed up love spell that Urd had nothing to do with. I'm shocked," said Skuld. "But having loads of girls after you sounds like something any guy would want."

"Well, when the girls start chasing you as a mob and attacking each other because they want to get rid of the competition it gets very non-fun very fast. We managed to get the spell lifted eventually, but believe you me, nobody knows just how bad to much of a good thing can be more than me."

"Okay, I understand the story. So what was your dream?"

"I was being chased by screaming hordes who wanted me again," replied Xander. "But this time it was all guys. Even Giles, Oz and Angel."

Bring on the eeeewww."

Xander's brow then furrowed for second. "Now that I think about it, I just realized something funny. I knew all the guys in my dream who were chasing me but one. He was dressed in this blue robe kinda thing, was currying a wooden sword, like one I saw in a martial arts movie once, and kept shouting something about 'the Blue Thunder of freakin' high school'.

"A blue robe and a wooden sword? That sounds like a kendo outfit to me," said Skuld.

"Yeah, kendo, I think that's what the guys in the movie called it," nodded Xander. "Anyway, I don't know what 'freakin' high school' that guy goes to, but no way is it as weird as Sunnydale High."

"If what I read about this town is true I think you might be right," concurred Skuld.

"Okay, I kept up my end of the deal. Now how about telling me what 's bothering you."

Skuld took a deep breath before speaking. "You remember back at the library how Urd talked about being possessed by the Lord of Terror and trying to destroy the universe and stuff?"

Xander nodded. He had a sense of where this story was likely to go, but knew it would be best to let Skuld speak the words herself.

"Well, it took everything Belldandy, me and Keniâ€"uh, a guy we know to stop the Lord of Terror. But in my dream we weren't able to stop him without destroyingâ€"|"

"Urd, right?" finished Xander.

Skuld nodded, a few tears welling up in her eyes. The little goddess sniffled and quickly wiped the tears away. "Lousy Urd. Making me have bad dreams and get all upset."

"Hey, if I had to dream like that with one of my friends in place of Urd I'd be feeling the need for some tears too," informed Xander. "She's you sister. Of course you'd feel upset about the idea of anything bad happening to her. And she'd feel the same if she thought something bad was going to happen to you. That's the way families work. Or so the 'very special episodes' on TV say."

"Yeah, I guess," sighed Skuld. "I just wish she didn't pick on me so much."

"That's just another part of being a family. Yeah, they can drive you nuts but at the end of the day you know that they love you and would do anything for you. If there's anything I've learned from Buffy, Will and Oz it's that. You do know that Urd loves you, right?"

Skuld cast her eyes to the floor.

Xander frowned for a second he went on. "Don't be like that, kiddo. You should have seen the look on Urd's face when she knew that Mara Bomb hadn't hurt you. It was 100 relief."

Skuld was again silent for a few moments but eventually nodded.
"Yeah, I know she loves me. She's just got a funny way of showing it sometimes."

"I could say the same about you," said Xander. "I'll go out on a limb here and say that the fighting I saw you two doing isn't nothing new."

"Got that right," snorted Skuld.

"And I'll also say that for all the fighting you do you love Urd too."

Skuld again looked at the floor.

Xander hhhmmmed. "Okay then, tell me I'm wrong. Tell me you hate your sister."

Skuld looked up at Xander with a slight glower. "Okay, yeah, as much of a pain as she can be, I do love Urd. She's my sister after all. But that was a really low way of making me admit it."

"Maybe, but I bet you feel better now, don't ya?" grinned Xander.

Skuld stopped to think for a second and quickly realized she indeed did feel better. "Yeah, I guess I do. Thanks, Xander."

"Anytime, Skuld."

Skuld suddenly looked uncomfortable and began to fidget a bit. "Uh, Xander, about what I saidâ€¦"

"Your secret will go with me to my grave. Now maybe we should back to bed. It's a sure bet tomorrow is going to be a long day."

Skuld nodded and with that she and Xander quickly cleaned up the ice cream, put the comics back into a stack and returned to Xander's room.

They slept peacefully for the rest of the night.

"And that should do it," assessed Angel as the last of the blood hit the floor. The vampire then took a moment to step back and check his work. On the floor of the main room of the mansion Angel called home a complicated pentagram filled in various spots with other arcane symbols had been painted in cow blood. Blood that was supposed to have been his food for the next few days Angel momentarily lamented.

Satisfied that the pentagram had been drawn correctly Angel reached for a book laying on a small table nearby. Earlier the book had been part of Giles' collection that he kept in the library at Sunnydale High. After the other Scoobies had left it had become one of the books Giles and Angel began to look through for information on Mara. But only an hour into their work the day's events had proved too much for the Englishman and Giles had drifted off. Angel had tried to make Giles as comfortable as possible without waking him by covering him with blanket secured from the office of the school nurse.

That done Angel began to dig through the books again on his own. Now long after he returned to his research the vampire had stumbled across something very interesting. The prospect might not have been pleasant but was worth a try.

His brief reflection on recent events over, Angel took a moment to steel himself, opened the book to a pre-marked page and began to read the chant that lay there.

"_Pa gu a sun fa, pa gu a sun fa, pa gu a sun fa, pa gu a sun fa, pa gu a sun fa_" recited Angel.

Almost instantly the illumination in the room seemed to fade and the great pentagram on the floor began to glow with a red fire.

"_Pa gu a sun fa, pa gu a sun fa, pa gu a sun fa, pa gu a sun fa, pa gu a sun fa_" continued the vampire as the pentagram began to glow brighter and a strong wind suddenly filled the room.

"_Pa gu a sun fa, pa gu a sun fa, pa gu a sun fa, pa gu a sun fa, pa gu a sun fa_" shouted Angel as the chant came to a crashing close. As soon as the final word was spoken a blinding burst of red light filled the room.

When he was able to open his eyes again Angel could clearly see a person was now standing in the center of the pentagram. The person in question was Mara.

"Well, well, look who's here," smirked the demon as she turned and saw Angel. "I wondered who was using that ancient ol' spell to summon me. I never would've guessed it was you, handsome."

"Don't start with me, Mara," growled Angel. "I summoned you here for a reason."

Mara struck a sultry pose and blew Angel a kiss. "Oh, why is that? Your little Slayer toy no longer able to love you long time?"

"Toss off all the nasty comments you want," snapped Angel. "I summoned you here for information, not to watch you act like a streetwalker."

Mara shot a glare at Angel that would have melted him if it had been possible. "You're lucky that summoning spell you used keeps me confined to this circle for as long as I'm here, deadboy. But you better believe I'll make you pay for that comment very soon."

Angel gave a mental wince. How the hell had Mara found out that annoying nickname Xander had given him?

Brushing that thought aside Angel returned to business. "You can get some of that revenge on me right now if you want, Mara. All you have to do is tell me how it is you know me."

"Tell you how I know you?" repeated the demon. "Now why should I tell you something like that? As a certain mysterious priest and longtime associate of mine is so fond of saying, 'That's a secret'."

"You'll tell me because we met when I was Angelus, didn't we?" asked

Angel. "You'll tell me because it'll make me recall something I did back in those days. Something that most likely involved death and pain for a lot of innocent people. And you know that those feelings will hurt me like nothing you could ever do to me.

So here's your shot, Mara. Be the demon that you are by reminding me of the demon I once was!

Mara stared at Angel for several seconds before erupting in another round of her blistering laugh. "Very good, Angelus. You make an excellent case. All right then, I'll tell about the time I first met you. And I'll tell you this right now, it did involve much terror and death."

With that, Mara began her story.

****To be continuedâ€|****

Author's notes: Just a few quick notes on some of the stuff that might have gone over people's heads.

"Say, who would go and build a big, Gothic-style castle in a town like this anyway?"

The castle in question is the one where Dracula set up shop in the first episode of season five.

_"Come on, guys. We're off to raid The Magic Box." _

The Magic Box, of course, is the shop that will eventually be run by Giles and Anya.

_"Those times I saw you making cow eyes at that arrogant, overexposed, pretentious, Eurotrash, pretty boy Dracula only reinforced that belief." _

The "Buffy Vs Dracula" episode hinted that Anya may have had a crush on Dracula.

_"She has a real Joseph Mengela air to her." _

Joseph Mengela achieved infamy as a Nazi doctor who performed horrible experiments on human subjects in concentration camps.

_"_Necronomicon Ex Mortis_, the Book of the Dead," grinned the mayor as he examined his prize. _

This bit is all a reference to the movie _Army of Darkness_.

_"We had to go all the way to Arkham, Massachusetts to steal that thing from Miskatonic University." _

Miskatonic University is a reference to the works of H.P. Lovecraft. Lovecraft was a great author whose horror fiction clearly had an influence on Buffy.

The Ryoga cameo was mostly for fun, but it also helped establish where Giles was when Angel was performing his spell.

All those comics Xander reads are also ones I'm a fan of. Sue me for indulging my fanboy side a bit. But the fact that Xander does like comics has popped up several times in the show so it's not as if it isn't cannon.

_I knew all the guys in my dream who were chasing me but one. He was dressed in this blue robe kinda thing, was currying a wooden sword, like one I saw in a martial arts movie once, and kept shouting something about 'the Blue Thunder of freakin' high school'. _

Yeah, the guy in Xander's dream was Kuno from _Ranma ½_. Having Xander become Xander-chan it only seemed right that Kuno should pop up to make life hard for him.

The "freakin' high school' line comes from the fact that Furinkan High School said in English sounds a bit like "freakin' high school".

That "_Pa gu a sun fa_" stuff that Angel uses to summon Mara is the same chant the Kei pirates use to control their Tao magic in _Outlaw Star_.

_As a certain mysterious priest and longtime associate of mine is so fond of saying, 'That's a secret'." _

Could Mara be talking about Xellos from _Slayers_? **That's a secret!** wink

6. Bad Old Days

Oslo, Norway

November 19, 1891

Darkness and cold gripped the city tightly. It was the sort of bitter cold that made even the hardened locals want nothing more than to toss another log onto the fire and to spend the night nestled in their beds with an extra blanket or two to help keep winter's chill at bay. Few people moved through Oslo's streets this night. The few who did moved at a hurried pace, clothes clutched tightly to their bodies to try and retain as much body heat as possible until the traveler could reach someplace warm.

But as with all things there are exceptions. In the dark streets near the harbor four people walked casually as if the cold meant nothing to them. Two of the travelers were women, one blonde the other brunette. Both were strikingly beautiful and wore thick designer cloaks made of wolf fur. The other two were men, one also blond and the other dark-haired. They wore thick woolen overcoats that were currently the fashion in England.

As they walked the travelers did so with a casualness and swagger that amazed anyone who caught a glimpse of them. To the dead the cold means very little.

"God, will you look at all this snow," grumbled the blond man. "It's like the Sahara Desert only the wrong color."

"It's not true what they say about how no two snowflakes are

identical," said the brunette girl as she watched several flakes float by. "That's just a rumor they started to make it easier for them to trick us. I can hear them all. Plotting away and singing Christmas carols all the while."

"Ask them to sing something else then," replied the blonde woman. "I hate Christmas."

"After what you did five years ago in Jerusalem I imagine Christmas is none too fond of you either, darlin'," countered the dark-haired man in a noticeable Irish brogue.

"Nothing like slaughtering two dozen religious pilgrims on the holiest day of the year to get you on Father Christmas' naughty list, eh, Darla?" snickered the blond man.

"I don't believe in Father Christmas, William," replied Darla. "But if I do ever met him I'll be sure to rip his throat out. For some reason he never visited me when I was a child."

"I told you to call me Spike," snorted the vampire. "But offing jolly old St. Nick, now that would be a spot of fun, wouldn't it, Dru?"

"Oh, that does sound like fun," cooed Drusilla. "I've never killed a saint before. I wonder what they taste like."

"Rather bland, I'd say," mused Darla. "What do you think, Angelus?"

"The problem with killing saints is that they can't become saints until after they're dead," said Angelus. "So the only way you could ever find out what a saint's blood tasted like is to kill him while he's still a mortal holy man."

"Which we did lots of last month," noted Spike. "Priests and nuns really are bland so I suppose Darla's right."

"Bland or not maybe we shouldn't have killed quite so many of them in such a obvious fashion back in Copenhagen," muttered Angelus. "That's what got that pack of vampire hunters after us."

"But, Angelus, we couldn't let my Spike have all the fun, now could we?" said Drusilla.

"She's has a point there," smirked Darla. "Besides, those vampire hunters were far from the most formidable that we've ever faced. It's not as if we were dealing with Holtz, after all."

"They may not have been Holtz but they did have numbers on their side," countered Angelus, momentarily recalling the torture and near extermination he'd suffered at the Englishman's hands. "That's what forced us to flee the city on the first available ship. Which, by cursed luck, brought us to this iceberg of a city."

"Nothing warms me up like a spot of blood and a bit of murder. And I think I've just found a place were we can all have a bit of both," smiled Spike as he pointed to a building with lit windows across the street. The sign above the building's entrance read "The Gray Cat Tavern".

"It's rather late and very cold. I imagine that there aren't very many people inside," mused Darla. "And we do need a place to stay. I don't relish the idea of spending the night in the sewers in this weather."

"There's Viking blood in there," whispered Drusilla. "It's in little flesh bottles that have 'Drink Me' written on their necks. Just like in _Alice in Wonderland_."

"Well, what's say we all make a little trip to the pub then?" said Angelus gleefully. With that, the four vampires strolled across the street. An icy blast of wind rushed into the tavern as Angelus pushed the door open, a sad omen of what was to come.

Inside were four men. Behind the bar was a heavysset man who looked as if he were fighting a losing battle to stay awake. At a nearby table, surrounded by many empty bottles, were two men wearing outfits common among the local sailors. One was in the middle of telling an extremely lewd joke, much to the enjoyment of his companion. Lastly, sitting at a table in a corner, was a bookish man who had a nervous air about him. A bowl of soup sat growing cold before him, but the man was too occupied with futzing with his pocketwatch and adjusting his glasses to pay it much heed.

"Oh, good evening ladies and gentlemen," said the bartender as the group entered. "I'm afraid we'll be closing soon so the kitchen is no longer open. But if you'd like to sit by our fire and have a quick drink to warm you on this awful night I'd be more than happy to accommodate you."

"Thank you kindly, good sir," replied Angelus warmly in passable Norwegian. Behind him Drusilla and Darla moved to stand a few feet away from the sailors, much to the enjoyment of the seamen who were now giving the female vampires their full attention. Spike, meanwhile, edged over to near were the nervous man sat.

The entrance of the newcomers seemed to have only made the man more worried. Spike noted the man's hands were now trembling slightly. _Hhhmmm, I think the little poof is on to us,_ thought Spike. _Right then. When we show our hand I'll have to grab him nice and quick to make sure he doesn't get away_.

At the bar Angelus was giving the bartender one of his best smiles. "Tell me, sir, just what sort of brandy would you happen to have back there?"

"Ah, a fellow brandy drinker," grinned the bartender. "Well, you're in luck tonight, my friend. I received a shipment of most excellent quality just the other day."

"Wonderful," said Angelus as he morphed to his vampiric visage. "Nothing washes down fresh blood quite like good brandy." The bartender had only time for a short gasp before Angelus grabbed him and sunk his fangs into the man's neck.

The two sailors sat staring, jaws agape at what had happened. They were snapped back to reality when Darla and Drusilla, now also in vamp mode, turned to face them.

"_Allez cuisine_" cackled Darla as she and Dru pounced on the two men.

As anticipated, the nervous man tried to bolt the moment Angelus changed. But Spike had been ready for him and grabbed the man before he'd made it two paces.

"No! No! No!" screamed the man as Spike turned him around so that they were face to face. "You're demons aren't you!? I'm trying to help you! I have the information she wanted! Let me go! Why are you doing this!?"

"We're vampires. This *is* what we do," answered Spike. "Now shut up and die with some dignity. On second thought, just shut up and die. I don't give one toss about your dignity." With that, Spike pulled the man's neck close and began to feed.

Several minutes later the vampires were done feeding and the bodies of their prey had been tossed casually in a corner.

"Mmm, that was a lovely meal," said Drusilla contentedly as she sat down in a chair and laid her head on a table. "I could taste the sea in him. Now I'm rocking from side to side on the inside just like a boat. Its ever so much fun."

"I'm happy for you, pet," grumbled Spike as he plopped down into a nearby chair. "But I'm still a bit peckish. A skinny little bloke like that isn't very filling."

"I'm afraid you'll just have to live with him for tonight, Spike," said Darla as she went about closing the shutters on the tavern's windows. Given recent events Darla didn't want to take the chance that a stray passerby might spot the bodies of the vampire's victims.

"Cheer up there, Spike," called Angelus from behind the bar. With a flourish the vampire pulled two large bottles of brandy out from under the bar. "This stuff will do a fine job of fillin' the rest of your belly. Best of all, these drinks are on the house."

Spike grinned at his fellow vampire's joke.

"Cheers, mate."

~*~

"Wake up!"

The words cut like an icepick through Angelus' brain. _Who's shouting at me like that and just how slowly can I kill them?_ wondered the vampire as he began to open his eyes.

Angelus' thoughts were interrupted when he suddenly felt a hand grab his throat in a viselike grip and haul him out of his chair and into the air. The shock of this managed to cut through the alcohol haze that had been clouding his mind just moments before.

Angelus looked down and saw that the person holding him was a woman with dirty blonde hair, a series of red markings on her face who sported a black dress with bust and hemlines that would have been

considered quite scandalous by the standards of the day. The womanâ€|no, a demon, the vampire's senses mentally amendedâ€|was extremely angry.

"You miserable, pathetic leech!" howled the female demon. "Do you have any idea what you've done!?"

"Gaaakkk!!" replied Angelus.

With a sound of disgust the demon released the vampire and watched as he tumbled to the floor.

"Nice of you to wake up," called Spike. "It seems we're in a rather big spot of trouble."

Angelus, after taking a moment to be grateful vampires didn't need air, looked to see Spike, Drusilla and Darla standing to the demon's side a several feet away. Though they were trying to hide it, Angelus could tell that they were all quite afraid. He didn't blame them a bit. Angelus' senses were sharp, even for a vampire, and right now his senses were screaming at him that the woman before him was not only a demon, but a very powerful one as well. As a rule demons and vampires usually didn't get along well.

This, to put it mildly, wasn't good. If he was going to get out of this Angelus decided he'd have to be very, very clever.

"My dear lady, it seems that my companions and I have done something to upset you," said the vampire in his most charming voice while giving a graceful bow. "Please enlighten me as to our transgression and I swear we'll do all we can to make amends."

"It takes more than sweet words to fool Mara, you worm!" spat the demon. "Because of you four the entire universe just may come to an end."

"Oh, fun!" giggled Drusilla.

"Love, now is not the time," whispered Spike. "Let's try and get the very angry and powerful demon over there not to kill us and then we can look into destroying world some other time."

"Promise?"

Spike gave a quick metal sigh but nodded. _She may be mad but that's part of why I love her_, he thought. _I just hope Angelus can talk us out of this so I can keep that promise_.

If Mara heard that conversation she ignored it. Right now all her attention was focused on Angelus. "You fools didn't know it, but the man with the glasses over there was a member of a cult who worshipped the Frost Giants, the ancient and sworn enemies of the Norse gods, both good and evil. The cult's worship of them was giving the Frost Giants a great deal of power.

"I doubt creatures like you know the ancient stories of this land so I'll enlighten you as to why this is bad. If the Frost Giants gain too much power they're sure to attack the Norse gods. A final war between the Norse gods and the Frost Giants is one of the signs of Ragnarok, the end of the universe.

"I don't know about you, but neither the gods or myself are keen on the idea of Ragnarok happening just now. That's why my masters assigned me the task of locating and destroying the Cult of the Frost Giants. The man you killed was a member of the cult who was willing to sell them out in exchange for his own life being spared. Because the cult has powerful mages who would have noticed if he'd just summoned me directly I arranged to meet him here to gain the location of the cult's headquarters."

Mara's eye flared red as she glared at Angelus. "But then the four of you had to come in here and kill him!"

Angelus took a moment to process what he'd just been told. Given the circumstances it was no wonder the demon was so enraged. In fact, the vampires were very lucky she hadn't destroyed them yet.

It was then that Angelus had an idea. It was a longshot, but it was better than being turned to dust. Or worse.

"Most ancient and powerful one, please accept our most sincere apologies for interfering in your most noble mission," began Angelus. It took all the vampire's self-control not to wretch at being forced to speak such sycophantic words. "Since it was our error we would be most honored if you would allow us to aid you in your quest."

"Aid me?" said Mara as she arched an eyebrow. "How can you lot help me?"

"Even a demon as powerful as you clearly are can't be everywhere," replied Angelus. "Allow us to be your agents and search the city for the base of this cult you speak of. Once we've located their lair we'll even destroy them for you if that's your wish."

"Big talk, leech," snorted Mara. "It took me weeks to get a line on the cult and find someone willing to turn on them. What makes you think you and your pals can accomplish what you claim?"

"Angelus can be mostâ€¦persuasive when he wants to be," cut in Darla.

"'Angelus?'" repeated Mara. "I've heard tale of you, vampire. They call you 'The Scourge of Europe' do they not?"

"Ay, that they do, my lady," answered Angelus.

Mara stood silently, her face a mask of contemplation as she considered the offer she'd been made.

"Very well, vampire, you and your companions have a deal," announced the demon after several long and tense moments. Mara then reached into the cleavage of her dress and pulled a scroll of parchment from it.

"Give me your hand, Angelus."

The vampire was less than thrilled at the idea of offering the demon his hand but complied. Mara carefully took Angelus' right hand with her left and lifted it up to face level. Suddenly the demon's head

leapt forward and Mara's teeth clamped down on the vampire's thumb.

Angelus let out a shout and jerked his hand free. "What in the hell are you doing?!" he growled. The vampire then glanced down at his injured finger. Under normal circumstances a small wound like that would heal almost instantly. Angelus' thumb, however, remained bloody. The vampire suspected that since the wound had been inflicted by a demon it might take longer to heal.

As Angelus turned his attention back to Mara he noted that she now had a quillpen in her left hand. "Here's the deal, you parasites. This parchment is a contract by which you four swear to track down and destroy the Cult of the Frost Giants by dawn tomorrow. If you succeed I'll release you from my service and let you live. If you fail you'll burn with the morning sun. After I've made you suffer for a while, that is. Of course, as with all demon contracts, this one must be signed in blood. Now, who wants to sign first?"

After a moment of silence Angelus said, "I will,". Mara nodded and handed him the contract and the quill. After dipping the end of the pen in some of the blood that had flowed from his finger, the vampire placed the parchment on a table and quickly signed his name.

As the other three vampires watched Angelus, Mara drew a wicked-looking knife from her sleeve and hurled it at the table. It embedded itself in the wood just inches from one of Angelus' hands. To his credit the vampire showed no reaction. He simply moved off to the side a bit.

"The rest of you may use the knife to draw your blood," informed the demon.

Drusilla, Spike and Darla did so and Mara's contract was soon signed. Once that was done the demon rolled the contract up and stuffed it back down her cleavage. Mara then drew a gray stone from an unseen pocket in her dress and tossed it to Darla.

"That's a summoning stone," said Mara. "Once you've completed your mission, if you complete it, squeeze the stone and speak the words '_Vise seg, Mara_' to summon me."

The demon then flashed a nasty grin. "Oh, and if you're thinking of skipping out on our contract I'd advise against it. That contract was signed in your own blood which means there's nowhere you can run or hide that I can't find you."

"We'll keep our word," replied Angelus. "By dawn tomorrow the Cult of the Frost Giants will be but a memory."

"Then stop the lollygagging and get to work, Dead Boy!" commanded Mara. "Or I'll make sure you all suffer twice as much before I let the sun burn you to dust." With that, Mara vanished leaving only the strong smell of brimstone behind her.

For several moments the vampires stood silent.

"'Deadboy?'" Angelus repeated. "Remind me to slowly skin the next person who calls me that."

"Well this is just bloody wonderful!" shouted Spike as he tossed his hands in the air in frustration. "We've just signed a blood contract with a demon who plans to torture and then roast us if we don't find and destroy some cult in just over a day. We may as well stake ourselves right now!"

"Stop being so dramatic, Spike," ordered Darla. "We're still alive and that's what counts."

"We're alive but we're dead. I don't know if that's funny or not," said Drusilla quietly.

"It's most definitely not funny," grumbled Angelus. "We've bought ourselves some time but we've also incurred quite a task."

"Don't be so down, dear," said Darla. "I spent decades under the personal tutelage of the Master. He taught me many things, including how to track down people and things."

"The Master never stuck me as the Sherlock Holmes of the vampire set," grouched Spike. "But how do you expect us to find this cult in one day when it took that demon three weeks just to get a solid line on them?"

"Demons like Mara are too arrogant and pompous to be very good investigators," answered Darla. "They have a hard time bringing themselves to consort with the sort of low-born creatures who often have the sort of information she was looking for. Lucky for us, thanks to the Master's teachings, I know where such creatures can often be found in cities like this."

"I guess that bald bastard turned to be good for something after all," said Angelus. "So, quickly, we'll burn down this place to cover our tracks and get to investigating."

"As Holmes might say, the game is afoot," smiled Darla.

~*~

It was called Unspace. That was what Mara called it anyway. It was an endless expanse of white stretching out across infinity. A place on the canvas of creation that had been left blank.

The only thing that existed in Unspace was will. Mara's will. The demon had found this void while out exploring the planes of creation one day, countless centuries ago, in the time she called her childhood. Even since then this place had been a sanctuary to her. A place where she could escape all the pressures that came with being a first-class unlimited demon.

It was in Unspace that Mara felt she could think most clearly. For in Unspace there were no distractions. Only her will keeping the nothingness at bay while she contemplated.

So Mara floated motionless in the great sea of Unspace, her mind turning the recent events in Oslo over and over again. Her thoughts constantly searching for another solution to the problem of the Cult of the Frost Giants. Something that didn't involve pinning all her hopes on four pitiful vampires.

It was then that she felt it.

Mara's eyes slowly opened. She was being summoned.

With a flash of red light the demon vanished.

Unspace was empty once more.

~*~

The first thing Mara saw when she materialized on Earth was a great mansion on fire. Then she heard the screams. From inside the mansion came a stream of screaming, both men and women. But they were not the screams of people escaping a fire or even being consumed by one. They were the screams of people being slaughtered.

"Do you find our work to be to your satisfaction, milady?" asked a gleeful voice to the demon's side. Mara turned her head to see Angelus standing beside her. The vampire's clothes were stained with blood and had several rips in them, his hair was mussed and his face, currently in its demonic visage, had a large smear of dark red blood around the mouth.

In his left hand Mara could sense the summoning stone she had given Darla. In his right hand Angelus wielded a fireplace poker. Covering the sharp end of the poker was more blood and bits of a gray substance that Mara guessed was likely brain matter.

"Just what am I looking at, leech?" demanded the demon. "It looks like just another vampire massacre to me."

"Ah, but the people dying in there are the Cult of the Frost Giants," informed Angelus proudly. "It took us quite some time, but we were finally able to find a minor ice demon who we were able to, shall we say, convince to tell us the location of the cult's headquarters. Once that was done my companions and I used our considerable charm to gather a group of a about twenty local vampires to help us."

"Weaker vamps always do tend to follow other vampires with strong forces of personality," recalled Mara.

"That they do," nodded Angelus. "Anyway, once we knew the location of the cult we headed her at once. It seems that the cult's' leader is a man of great means so he decided to make his private mansion the cult's base. He chose a wonderful location really. Out here, away from the city and on the edge of a forest, no one would notice a cult at work. Or one being exterminated."

"But vampires can't get into a private residence without being invited. How did you get inside?"

"Ah, that," said Angelus. "In that regard fortune was with us yet again. When my followers and I arrived we happen to hear some strange noises coming from a shed in the back. It turned out to be two of the servants having a late night romantic encounter. As luck would have it those servants lived in the mansion. So all we had to do was grab the lady by her throat and threaten to tear it out to convince her gentleman friend to invite all of us into the house.

"Our good luck didn't stop there. It seems that most of the cult was

gathered here tonight to perform some sort of ritual in the basement. Our arrival quickly put an end to that.

"So for about the past hour my fellow vampires have been destroying the cult's members and anyone else they should happen to come across. Witnesses and all that. The cult members put up a good fight for about the first forty minutes but after that it was all downhill. We should have killed everyone in the next fifteen minutes or so."

It was then that a horrific scream came from the front of the mansion. Mara and Angelus turned in time to see a man covered in flames running out the main door.

With a small sigh Angelus pulled back the poker, took aim, and then hurled it at the burning man. The poker flew through the air and into the center of the man's chest in a matter seconds. The man stopped screaming abruptly, gave a small gurgle, and then fell to the ground dead.

Mara didn't even blink.

His work done Angelus turned back to the demon. "So, milady Mara, I think that my companions and I have lived up to our end of the contract. If it pleases you to do so, I'd like to humbly request that you fulfill your end of our bargain."

Mara nodded, reached into her cleavage and pulled out the contract the vampires had signed in blood the night before. She held the up at a right angle, muttered a few arcane words under her breath, and watched as the scroll caught fire. In seconds the parchment was ash blowing in the wind.

"Congratulations, deadboy," said Mara. "You and your leech friends get to continue to live, as it were." The demon then fixed Angelus with a fiery gaze that made even the vampire shudder. "If you'd like to keep existing I'd suggest never, ever crossing my path again, Angelus. Because I swear to you right here and now, next time I won't be so generous."

With a final scowl Mara then vanished.

Angelus stood motionless for several moments. He then let loose a breath he didn't even know he'd been holding. "Honestly, if my heart still beat it's days like this that would give me a heart attack.

"Damn high and mighty demon bitch! I'll find some way to make her pay for treating me like a dog one of these days. Mark my words I will!"

Angelus then turned his gaze to the burning house. "I suppose I'd best round up, Darla, Spike and Drusilla. We've done what we came to do and it'll be dawn soon. If we don't want to burn we'd best start looking for shelter."

After heaving a final sigh Angelus headed for the burning house to locate his companions.

For several minutes the area where the demon and the vampire had been was totally silent. Then the face of a boy, no more than ten years

old peaked out from behind a bush. The boy looked at the spot where the two beings of evil had talked and at the still burning mansion. He stifled some tears. His face had seen many of them in the last hour and he couldn't bear to shed anymore.

"Mara, Angelus, Darla, Spike and Drusilla," whispered the boy. "I'll remember those names. Someday I swear I'll make all of you pay for what you did here to tonight."

With that the boy drew back into the underbrush and disappeared.

~*~

"Damn," whispered Angel. "I remember now. We slaughtered everyone in the mansion. The cult members, the servants, the household's children."

"Yeah, you had the touch back in the day, deadboy," mocked Mara. "I was never into the gore thing. If I'd have found the cult I was planning to call my bosses and let them send in some trolls or something to do all the wetwork. You saved me the trouble. And you reveled in it."

Angel glared at Mara. "Yes, I did. But that was then and this is now. I'm not like that anymore."

"I doubt the late Jenny Calendar would agree with that," retorted the demon.

Angel flinched.

The vampire then took a breath to steel himself. "You've told me about how we met, Mara. Now I think it's time you left." Angel then reached for the spellbook to read the dismissal spell.

"Whoa, whoa, space cowboy," said Mara. "That was the first time we met but it wasn't the last time our paths crossed. There was another time. It was one of the most important moments in your life, as a matter of fact. Would you like to hear that story too, my little fallen angel?"

After several long, silent moments Angel nodded.

Mara grinned savagely.

~*~

April 2, 1900

Peking, China

Across the city fires burned, people cried and screamed, flesh and bone torn and shattered and fear hung like a heavy fog in the air. Atop a warehouse in the docklands Mara stood and watched all that was happening with glee. "Ah, the smells of revolution! You know I love it."

A strong breeze carrying the scent of a nearby fire blew by ruffling the black jacket Mara wore. The coat was part of an outfit that

consisted of green trousers, a brown shirt, Mara's necklace of animal teeth, a khaki web belt, and sturdy black boots. The outfit was based on uniforms currently being worn by soldiers in Europe with a few modifications to suit the demon's personal taste.

Off in the distance there was a large explosion. Mara smiled. Tensions between the native Chinese and foreigners had reached the breaking point in recent months and now a full-scale rebellion was well under way. Mara had spent a lot of time in the region lately, fanning the flames of hatred on both sides and brokering dark pacts with the various factions who were vying for power. As people ran through the nearby streets screaming the demon took a moment to bask in the satisfaction of a job well done.

It was then that Mara felt something hit her. The demon stumbled and for a moment almost lost her balance. But Mara was able to right herself in time and quickly began to look around. "What the hell was that?! That force that hit me, it didn't feel like a physical blow. It felt like an attack from the astral plane or something similar."

Mara then closed her eyes and began to concentrate. She let her demonic senses roll out across the area searching for the source of the disturbance. After several minutes Mara found what she was looking for.

Mara opened her eyes and then vanished.

The demon rematerialized herself close to where she'd located the center of the disturbance. As the world again came into view the first thing Mara noted was that she was inside a Buddhist temple. A temple that was currently on fire. Mara paid the fire no mind and continued to look for the source of the event. A few steps away she spotted a finely crafted sword driven into the base of a statue. The demon walked over to the statue and with a quick jerk pulled the sword free.

"Does this mean I'm now the king of England?" mused Mara to herself.

Mara then gave the sword a twirl in her hand and slashed at the air. "Hhhmmm, study yet flexible, light and still perfectly balanced. From the look of it I'd say it's old too. Three hundred years at least. Not the sort of thing one just leaves laying around a burning temple."

The demon gave a small shrug and, with the sword still in hand, headed deeper into the burning building.

It didn't take long for Mara to find the girl's body. She was young, not even out of her teens, and dressed in a dark blue silk outfit that was popular among martial artists. A few feet from her right hand was a wooden stake whose back end had been elegantly carved into the shape of a dragon. On the girl's neck were two puncture wounds.

Mara looked at the girl's body.

"Vampires."

She then reached over and picked up the stake. Mara spent several moments examining it before giving a bemused grin.

"Toothpick."

The demon then stored the stake in one of her coat pockets. She then reached out to the wound on the girl's neck and ran a finger through a bit of the still warm blood that stained the fallen girl's skin. Mara put the finger with blood on it in her mouth and tasted it. The demon's smile grew larger.

"Slayer."

Mara nodded to herself as stood up from over the dead girl. "Well, well, looks like some vampire out there had themselves a very good night. Still, this does explain that force that hit me. The mystic energy released by the death a Slayer is considerable. The senses of a lowborn creature like a vampire aren't sharp enough to sense such things but mine are."

The demon then took a deep breath. "Oh, and I smell the musk of vampire nookie in the air as well. A post-victory celebration, no doubt."

The demon gazed at the fallen Slayer's body. "Was it worth it, little one? Giving up the dream of being a normal girl, knowing that you were condemned to die a young, and likely terrible death?"

Mara then hefted the sword casually up and against her shoulder. "Not that I really care. But I'd just like to know for the record."

"Anyway, I'd like to thank you for generous contribution to my kitchen set. I'm sure this sword will be excellent for slicing watermelons. And that stake, I mean, toothpick will be a part of my oral hygiene routine for a long time, I assure you."

"If it's any consolation, you don't won't have to worry about the rats and bugs making a meal of your corpse. Then temple is burning quite nicely so I'd image you'll nice and cremated very soon."

Mara then took a moment to spit on the girl's face. The body's skin hissed and burned where the saliva touched.

"_Arrivederci_, Slayer," mocked Mara as she vanished.

~*~

Mara reappeared on the roof of a building several blocks from the burning temple. "My senses tell me that there are some vampires right around here. I want to see the one that killed that Slayer with my own eyes."

Mara's eyes scanned the people in the area. At first all she saw was Chinese running one direction or another trying to escape the chaos that gripped the city. Then the demon spotted them. Through the storm of panic that was Peking walked four westerners. Two men and two women. Two with dark hair and two blondes. The two women and the dark-haired man were dressed in the elegant clothes of the day.

The blond man wore a workman's clothes and an expression of unrestrained, sadistic glee on his face. As Mara watched the blonde vampire even gave a merry little hop over a barrel that lay in the street as he walked.

"I think I just found my Slayer slayer," concluded the demon.

Mara then blinked. "Hey, wait a second! I know those vampires! They're the ones who I had destroy the Cult of the Frost Giants back in Norway almost ten years ago. Their names were Angelus, Darla, Spike and Drusilla."

It was then that Mara's demonic senses set off a little alarm bell in her head. Mara leaned forward and squinted at Angelus. "No way." Mara reached into her jacket, pulled out a pair of glasses and secured them to her face. "I'm seeing it but I don't believe it. Angelus has a soul!"

Mara scratched her chin and tried to think. "A vampire with a soul? In all my years I don't think I've ever heard of such a thing. Sure, restoring a vampire's soul is possible but why would anyone want to do that to a creature like Angelus?"

After several moments of thought a lightbulb went off in the demon's mind. "Oh, I get it. I bet Angelus went and killed someone with loved ones who were skilled in magic. They restored his soul to let his human heart bear the burden of having killed and tortured so many. Twisted! I like it!"

Mara's gaze again returned to the street only to find that vampires gone. "Dammit!" cursed Mara. "I got so lost in my own thoughts they slipped away. And here I was hoping to have a little fun with those vamps. I wonder if Angelus' friends know about his soul. I wonder what kind of fun things might happen if I told them."

It was then that another explosion rose up off in the distance. Mara sighed. "Oh, right, I have work. Tormenting vampires is cheap kicks compared to a revolution anyway. I guess I'd better get back to it."

Mara gave her new sword a quick twirl and then vanished.

~*~

"And I'm sure you know the rest of the story," finished Mara.

Angel only nodded. He recalled how later that same night Darla had confronted him over his not-so evil ways. She'd got so far as to have kidnapped a baby and demanded that he kill it in front of her to prove that he was still the monster she thought he was. In the end Angel fled with the child and returned it to its parents. But that confrontation with Darla had forced Angel to split from the woman who had been his sire, mentor, companion and lover for decades.

For a moment Angel wondered at have things might have been if Mara had indeed reentered his life that night. Thankfully he would never know.

"You know, I kept meaning to track you down and see what you were up to," said Mara casually, snapping Angel back from his revelry. "But

you know how it is. One war ends and two more start up. There's a revolution somewhere. Ethnic or religious hatred flares. I tell ya, the past ninety-nine years of this century have been a boom time for us demons. I can't wait to see what the next one holds. Assuming there is a next century. I'll have to check to see when the next Apocalypse is scheduled.

"Anyway, with all that I had to do I never did find the time to check up on you. So imagine my surprise one day when I hear who happens to be cooling his heels in particularly nasty hell dimension."

"Full circle," whispered Angel to himself.

"You got it," mocked Mara. "Well, this has been fun but I've got to go. Evil waits for no demon. See ya, deadboy."

With that Mara vanished.

Angel stood silent for a time just staring at the pentagram where the demon had been.

"Enjoy yourself while you can, Mara," he said eventually. "Because the next we meet there will be a reckoning. A reckoning that only one of us is going to walk away from."

**

To be continuedâ€¦

**

Author's notes: Well, that's finally done. This is another part of the story I was itching to do from day one. I can tell you it was even more fun to write than I expected it to be. But I'll ruminate more later. Let's point out a few things first.

—

"She has a point there," smirked Darla. "Besides, those vampire hunters were far from the most formidable that we've ever faced. It's not as if we were dealing with Holtz, after all."

—

Holtz is, of course, the time-displaced vampire hunter who's giving the Fang Gang such a hard time in the current season of Angel.

—

"Allez cuisine!" cackled Darla as she and Dru pounced on the two men.

"Allez cuisine" is the line the great Chairman Kaga uses to kick off battles in his Kitchen Stadium in every episode of the Japanese cooking show Iron Chef, of which I am great fan. The phrase literally means "Go kitchen!" in French.

—

"Love, now is not the time," whispered Spike. "Let's try and get the very angry and powerful demon over there not to kill us and then we can look into destroying world some other time."

—

It takes him almost a hundred years to keep that promise, but in Buffy's season two he and Dru almost did destroy the world.

—

"That's a summoning stone," said Mara. "Once you've completed your mission, if you complete it, squeeze the stone and speak the words 'Vise seg, Mara' to summon me."

— —

"Vise seg, Mara" literally means "Appear, Mara," in Norwegian. Yes, I actually took the time to track down and consult a Norwegian-English dictionary.

Also, everything that Mara said about the Frost Giants is true and comes from actual Norse myth.

I had some fun with Mara calling Angelus 'deadboy'. Now you see why Angel hates it when Xander calls him that so much.

The whole concept of Unspace is something that just came out of left field. I was trying to think of some place for Mara to be when Angelus summoned her but I kept drawing a blank. All I could think of was Mara floating in a white void. So I decided to just run with the void. After musing on it for several minutes I christened this void Unspace.

The name being my attempt to sound like comic book writers like Warren Ellis and Grant Morrison. If you ever get the chance, read anything they wrote. Joss Whendon himself is a huge fan of Warren's Planetary book. Joss wrote in introduction to the first Planetary collection and even said in interviews that he had an idea for a Planetary story that he wanted to write. Sadly, for a variety of reasons, this will never happen. But Joss did later say he thought of a way to use the idea elsewhere.

Anyway, even though it was a real spur of the moment thing I really like the concept of Unspace. I wouldn't be surprised if I dig the idea out to use in another story of mine someday.

—

"Whoa, whoa, space cowboy," said Mara.

—

I know this line sounded a bit odd. At first it was just going to be "Whoa, whoa, cowboy." But then I got to thinking about how the line "See you, space cowboy," ended so many episodes of the anime Cowboy Bebop and after thinking about it for several seconds I knew I'd have to put it in.

Also, IMO, the line "You're going to carry that weight" fits Angel just as much as it does _Cowboy Bebop_'s Spike Spiegel.

—

_"_Arrivederci_, Slayer," mocked Mara as she vanished._

--

Originally I wanted Mara to say, "_Zǎ ijiǎ n_, Slayer" which is how you'd say "Goodbye, Slayer," in Chinese. Of course, about 1.5 seconds of though made me realize that while people in America might get Mara saying goodbye in Italian, almost no one would get her saying that in Chinese. Besides, "_zǎ ijiǎ n_" is how one says goodbye in modern Mandarin Chinese, which I don't think people would have been using in turn of the century Peking (known today as Beijing).

For the record, Beijing was one of the places I visited while in China. I had a pretty good time there and strutting my stuff on the dance floor of a Beijing disco is one of my favorite memories of the trip. Of course, it would have been better if I had any skill at all in dancing which I don't. But no one at the club seemed to notice and I had great time so I don't worry about it.

I'm sure all of you recognized the China flashback as coming from the _Buffy_ season five episode "Fool For Love". I knew the first time I saw that episode that I'd have to find some way to work it into the story. How could I not? The slow motion as Angel, Darla, Dru and Spike walk through the city, the looks on their faces, and the beats of the music hitting at just the right moment. Truly it was one of the greatest episodes of _Buffy_ ever!

Plus, her whole one-sided interaction with the dead Slayer gave another chance to drive home just how evil Mara can be. Though I admit I sort of dithered on if Mara should spit on the body or not. I really wondered if I might be going too far on that one. But then I figured that Mara's a first-class, unlimited demon. To get a rank like that I'd say doing terrible thing on a daily basis is pretty much a requirement. So I went with it.

Now for the good stuff; Spike, Dru and Darla. I hope their inclusion in the story was a pleasant and enjoyable surprise for everyone.

God, these guys were a blast to write! Spike is just so much fun. I've had some mixed feeling about the direction he's taken in the last few seasons, but hot damn I'm burning to see what happens with him next.

But I really love "old school" Spike. Back when he and Dru were running the vamps in Sunnydale was, in my book, the peak of all things _Buffy_. Not that the stuff that came after was bad by any sense of the word. It's just that Spike back then was totally and unrepentantly evil. And that sort of villain is just a kick to cut loose with.

Then there was Dru. Wonderful, evil, crazy Dru. I was actually worried I might not be able to handle that bizarre way she talks. But once I started writing it just came to me. Great, I hear Drusilla in

my head. This fanfic stuff is making me crack!

Lastly, we have Darla. I don't need to tell you folks what she's meant to the world of Angel in the last few seasons. Originally, only Spike and Dru were going to be with Angelus in this story, but then I saw that the four were together in "Fool for Love" and the Angel episode "Darla" so I had to put her in.

Darla was also interesting to write. So was loyal to the Master who Angel treated as a joke. She loved Angelus but was willing to leave him to Holtz to save her own skin. Is it any wonder that she can screw with Angel like no one else?

Anyway, I think I've rambled enough. I'll close by saying that you should hang onto your hats, folks. We're getting closer to the grand finale but the surprises are nowhere near done.

7. Resolute

Morning in Sunnydale.

That was when the monsters that prowled the seemingly idyllic town skulked away to wait for night when they can prowl again. Now as the golden rays of the sun washed over Sunnydale the human population awoke to enjoy the time when the city was theirs.

This was the time when those who were ignorant of the fact that they lived on the threshold of Hell could almost, just almost, convince themselves that Sunnydale was simply another slice of the suburban paradise of Southern California. But even the brightest morning could never get rid of the slight feeling that there was just something wrong about the town.

Those who knew Sunnydale for what it was looked at mornings differently. Morning was when you knew that just for a second, you could stop and catch your breath. It was the start of a chance to prepare for what battles, literal or figurative, could come during the night. Those that knew Sunnydale's true nature knew that the really terrible things always happened at night.

This day would be no exception.

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The light coming in through the window woke Buffy. The Slayer sat up in her bed and had a quick stretch. She glanced to her right side and saw that her beloved stuffed toy pig, Mr. Gordo, was still there. Mr. Gordo had comforted Buffy through many a bad night since her childhood. As she climbed out of bed Buffy gave the toy a small smile. It hadn't been since Angel's nightmarish transformation to Angelus the year before that she'd found herself clutching Mr. Gordo so tightly for comfort as she had the night before.

The Slayer headed to her closet and quickly made her selection of outfit; black tanktop, a reddish brown light jacket and matching

pants, and stylish but sturdy black boots. After a quick glance in the mirror Buffy headed down to the kitchen.

Joyce Summers, the world's #1 mom in the eyes of her daughter, stood at the stove flipping a pancake. Three other pancakes sat on a plate on the counter just to her side.

"Hi, mom," greeted Buffy in a voice that her mother found surprisingly upbeat. Especially in light of the fragile state Buffy had been in when she'd returned home the night before.

"Morning, Buffy. Are you feeling okay?" asked Joyce, the concern in her voice clear.

Buffy nodded as she picked up the plate of pancakes from the counter and reached for the cabinet with the syrup. "I'm feeling better," replied the Slayer slowly. "And by better I mean not wanting to cry until my eyes fall out anymore."

"Do you want to talk some more?"

Buffy, syrup now in hand, shook her head and headed for the dinning room table. "No. Talking means thinking about how one of my best friends is now a prime candidate for winning a garden show and my other best friend could now borrow clothes from me. If I were a few inches taller that is."

"Buffy" began Joyce.

Buffy looked at her mother, her face now a mask of total seriousness. "Mom, its okay. It's just last night was so crazy and awful I just want"

"Want what?" asked the blonde woman as she sat down at the table across from her daughter.

"I just want to pretend that today's just another normal Saturday," said Buffy. "Until I get to the library and meet up the guys and those goddesses I told you about, I just don't want to have to deal with what happened."

Buffy was quite again for several moments, just staring at her breakfast. "Is that being selfish?" she finally asked.

Joyce took her daughter's hand, gave it a squeeze and smiled. "No, honey, it isn't. Not one bit. What's say we eat now, okay?"

Buffy returned her mother's smile and nodded. What harm did a little denial ever do to anyone?

While Buffy and her mother talked brightly over breakfast the weight of the stake in her jacket's lining was never far from the Slayer's thoughts.

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Xander strolled toward the kitchen of her house feeling much better than she had hours before. A few hours of nightmare-free sleep and a quick shower had made her feel almost normal. Though taking a shower in a female body had been a somewhat disconcerting experience. Many naughty thoughts had been had.

But as Xander approached the kitchen she actually allowed herself a small smile. After breakfast it would be time to head to Sunnydale High and come up with a way to find Mara and teach her what happened to demons that messed with the Scooby Gang.

The teen took a moment to fantasize about Mara's head stuffed and mounted on her bedroom wall. Ah, what a pretty pictureâ€¦

Urd and Skuld sat at the table and gave Xander a quick nod of greeting when she entered. Skuld then returned to scarfing her cereal while Urd went back to rifling through Sunnydale's morning paper. Belldandy was at the counter cleaning up after putting the finishing touches on the most wonderful breakfast Xander had ever seen.

Pancakes, bacon, eggs, milk, orange juice, muffins, sausage, and fresh fruit all sat on the kitchen table prepared to perfection. Which was extra amazing since Xander was sure that none of what was needed to make any of those things had been in her house the night before.

Xander quickly pushed her mental questions about how all this had come to be aside. It was chow time!

At the counter Belldandy began to put the cooking utensils away while humming a merry tune to herself. "Good morning, Xander. How are you feeling?"

"I'm feelin' like I've died and gone to Heaven's breakfast buffet," replied Xander as she dug into some scrambled eggs. "Hey, once I've got my Y-chromosome self back you guys wouldn't be in the market for a brother, would ya? I could help you fix stuff around the house, lift heavy things, and kill spiders in the bathroom for you. You know, brother stuff."

Urd made an amused sound. "Wadda ya say, Belldandy? I think we've got room at the house, and a certain motor lovin' someone could certainly use a male friend who wouldn't take advantage of his nice guy nature."

"Yeah, can we keep 'im?" asked Skuld earnestly. The little goddess had felt a bond with Xander since their talk the night before and decided that she liked her. Plus, the Sunnydale teen's goofy but charming attitude seemed to Skuld like a vast improvement to Keiichi's nerdy ways.

"Uh, I really don't thinkâ€¦" stammered Belldandy.

"Hey, Belldandy, relax," said Xander. "I was kidding. I'm Xander. I'm joke guy, er, girl. Its what I do."

Urd chuckled at her sister. "You're too easy sometimes, sis."

Skuld mentally frowned. She liked Xander but making him their brother

was a pretty silly and impractical idea. The little goddess felt a bit chagrinned about her previous words.

"I have to say, considering what happened last night you're in rather good spirits, Xander," said Belldandy, wanting to change the subject.

"What can I say? It's a survival mechanism," shrugged the teen as she continued to eat. "In the Scooby Gang you learn pretty quick that even though the world might end tonight, you still have to go to school and try not to flunk your history test. Once that's done you can go stomp demon butt. I guess that over the years we've all just sort of learned to carry on as best we can until its time to fight. I'm sure Buffy, Willow, and Oz are hangin' in there.

"Besides, this really isn't the worst we've ever been through. Willow is stuck as a tree and me as a girl but other than that we're fine. Now last year when Deadboy went all evil on us that wasâ€¦"

Xander mentally kicked herself. Angel's return to evil was the last thing that Buffy would want brought up in any way at this point. Neither would Angel but Xander didn't give one rat's ass about how the vampire felt about anything. Except Buffy, and that was a touchy subject at best.

"You were saying something," prodded Urd.

"Uh, nevermind," said Xander. "Long story. Let's just finish breakfast. We'll need to be heading to the school soon."

Deciding to respect Xander's wishes the goddess returned to their meal.

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About forty-five minutes later Angel was walking purposely through the halls of Sunnydale High toward the library. The tunnels that ran like a maze under the city had gotten him to the school in record time this morning. Angel's trademark duster had then provided enough cover to get the vampire inside without suffering any burns. As Angel entered the library he saw that Giles, Xander, Buffy, Urd, Skuld, and Belldandy were already there.

"Ah, Angel, you're here," said Giles by way of greeting. "Good, I was just about to share some information I found on Mara with the others."

"Don't let me stop you," replied Angel. "I'm all for anything that'll help us to put Mara down once and for all."

Belldandy frowned at the vampire's words but said nothing.

"As I was saying," began Giles, "I was going through some of the books that just arrived from the Watcher's Council and I made a most fortunate discovery. A book called Great Demons of the NorthLands. It was published almost fifty years ago, but it uses Mara as a case study and as such has a great deal of information about her."

Giles picked up a worn looking red book from a nearby table and began to leaf through it. "The author calls Mara a 'spoiler' demon."

"So she has the power to make milk go bad really, really fast?" interrupted Xander.

Giles gave Xander a look.

"Shutting up now."

Giles heaved a small sigh and continued. "He called Mara a spoiler demon because her main activity as far as can be discerned is bringing misery and ruin to the lives of those who've received divine blessings or favors of some sort. By doing this her goal seems to be to turn people to the dark powers in order to reclaim what they've lost."

Urd nodded. "Increasing evil's market share in terms of human souls is Mara's main gig. She's damn good at it too. She made first class, unlimited demon in record time from what I heard. Of course, making bad things happen to good people isn't all she does."

"Quite right," nodded Giles. "Using this book, as well as a few other sources with information on Mara that I was able to find, I've been able to put Mara at the sites of a disturbingly high number history's blackest moments.

"Just a few examples I was able to find are; the mass executions during the French Revolution, slave trading in Africa and the Middle East, the violent conquest of Central and South America by the Spanish, persecution of Christians in 17th century Japan, piracy in the Caribbean in the 1500s, numerous riots in the United States during the 1960s and 70s, the Boxer Rebellion in China in 1900, and even the Fall of Rome."

Angel gave a mental wince at the mention of the Boxer Rebellion. Hopefully he and the Slayer Spike had killed there would not come up.

"In no case was she ever the direct cause of these events, but there is compelling evidence of her fanning the flames to make bad situations worse," said Giles, still reading from the book. "Listen to how the author describes Mara; 'In my many years researching demons and other evil creatures I have rarely found any who seem to take as much delight in bringing misery and ill fortune to humans as Mara. Wherever she goes strife and heartbreak follow. She is truly as wicked a creature as any that has ever walked this Earth.'"

"That seems a rather harsh," said Belldandy. "Mara has indeed done many bad things over the centuries. But she wasn't always like that. I know there's still some good in her."

"I'd like to think so too," replied Urd solemnly. "But look what she's done since she came to Sunnydale. We've never seen her that violent. I think she may have finally gone all the way over the edge."

"But remember around New Years? She was really nice after she lost her memory," reminded Skuld. "Uh, well, she was nice until she remembered who she was."

"This 'nice' Mara you guys are going on about turned my best friend

into a plant and me into a girl!" flared Xander. "I'm with the guy that wrote the book. Mara's a Big Bad and the sooner we make her dead the better it'll be for everyone."

"Of course there will be no making Mara dead until we get the passwords to turn you and Will back to normal," interjected Buffy. "Then Mara gets the full Slayer treatment."

The goddesses looked at each other uneasily. The ease with which Xander and Buffy had talked of killing Mara was disconcerting to them to say the least.

"I am in full agreement with Xander and Buffy," cut in Giles. "However, I think it only fair to tell you that the author of this book had a reason to hate Mara more than any of us."

That statement got everyone's attention.

"Enough with the cryptic, Giles," demanded Buffy. "What do you mean?"

"The name of the man who wrote this book was Eric Oystan. He was a researcher for the Watchers Council from Norway."

At the mention of Norway Angel felt himself go tense. The events of the previous night's conversation with Mara suddenly flashed back to him.

Giles continued. "When Oystan's father, Jan, was ten he lived with his parents in a mansion just outside of Oslo. His parents were servants there. It seems the Oystan's employer was the leader of a cult that worshipped beings known as Frost Giants, the ancient and eternal enemies of the Norse Gods."

Urd, Belldandy and Skuld all gasped at that revelation.

"Someone worshipping the Frost Giants! Oh my, there's no end to the terrible things that could come from that!" gaped Belldandy.

"Yeah, Mara's a baby kitten compared to a Frost Giant!" exclaimed Skuld.

Urd massaged her temples as if she were trying to ease a massive headache. "Someone would have to be out of their mind to worship those guys. They're part of the prophecy that brings about Ragnarok, for pity's sake!"

"Okay, worshipping Frost Giants bad! We get it!" said Buffy. She then nodded at Giles to continue.

The librarian did so. "The Oystans suspected their employer was up to something strange but didn't want to do anything till they had proof. Sadly, they never got the chance. The cult was gathered in the mansion one night performing a ritual when a squad of vampires somehow gained entry to the house. The massacred everyone there, cultist and innocent alike. Jan Oystan survived only because his parents shoved him down a laundry chute just before the vampires found them. The chute lead to a rarely used room in the mansion's basement where the boy was able to scramble out a window without being seen. He then took refuge in the nearby forest.

"While he was hiding the vampire who lead the attack come outside to report to the demon who had ordered the massacre. The demon's name was Mara. The attack was spearheaded by four vampires. Their names were Drusilla, Spike, Darla, and Angelus."

The humans and the goddesses turned to look at Angel.

"Another fond pre-soul memory, Deadboy? spat Xander.

"Angel?" said Buffy, her voice a mix of confusion, pleading, and anger.

The goddesses looked at each other uncomfortably. Belldandy and Urd felt extra tension do to the fact that they'd heard terrible tales of the vampire Angelus. Though they'd never thought he'd had any connection to Angel until just now.

"Buffy, you saw what I was like after I came back from that hell dimension," said Angel. "It took me a long time to get my head back in order. Even then there were some blank spots."

"So why didn't you tell me?" asked the Slayer, her previous emotions replaced only by hurt. "I, we, could have found some way to help you."

Angel shook his head. "You, all of you, have been through a lot lately. You didn't need my problems in addition to your own. Besides, most of the blank spots were from before I got my soul back. I was in no hurry to remember that part of my life.

"But the other night I had a dream and Mara was in it. She came to me in that hell dimension to taunt me but I couldn't remember anything more about her than that. That's why I wanted you to see if Giles could find out anything about her. Stuff people see in their dreams here in Sunnydale have a tendency to pop in the real world, you know."

Giles, Xander, and Buffy nodded in concurrence.

"Last night Iâ€|remembered a meditative trick that's good for bringing up lost memories. But you need solitude to perform it. So I went back home and performed the ritual. It worked; everything Giles just told us came flooding back. I was going to tell all of you but Giles beat me to the punch."

"Sure you were," muttered Xander. Buffy shot her friend a glare and Xander backed down. But the look of contempt for Angel never left the girl's face.

Not that in this case the vampire blamed Xander. He hated lying to the others but telling the truth about conjuring up Mara would only make things worse. The memories of his attempt as Angelus to have the Earth sucked into Hell were too fresh. Knowing that Angel was dealing in any way with a demon that had hurt them all on such a personal level would be devastating regardless of his reasons.

Heavy silence again reigned.

It was Giles who broke the somber air. "Well, with that said, I

suppose I should finish the story. Knowing the names of the creatures that killed his parents Eric Oystan vowed revenge. However, as he grew to manhood he was forced to accept the fact that he could never get the training needed to kill such powerful beings within his lifetime.

"Instead he devoted himself to occult research in hopes he might find the means for his revenge there. Oystan had a very keen mind and his skills quickly caught the attention of the Watchers. Eventually they recruited him as a researcher. Oystan hoped that someday the information he gathered might be used by the Slayer or someone else to avenge his parents. This wish was carried on by his son, Jan, who, as I said, wrote this book.

"As a matter of fact, it was the Oystans who compiled most of the information the Watchers have on Drusilla, Spike, Darla, and Angel. I even read some of what they wrote to Buffy and the others, Angel, when we first learned about you and when Spike and Drusilla first come to town."

Angel just nodded. "Look, I know this flash back to my bad ol' days is the last thing any of us needed right now. For what its worth I'm sorry. But we have to focus on the task at hand. Namely stopping Mara."

"I hate to say it, but Deadboy's right," said Xander. "As a wise comic book character named Cable often says 'What is, is.' So let's forget Angel's trip down bloody memory lane and get back to find a way to put the slayage to Mara."

Though he didn't like to admit it, Angel felt a small bit of gratitude to Xander. From the start Xander had made it clear that he didn't like Angel. But over the years the teen had learned to at least tolerate the vampire. If Xander was willing to shove this aside Buffy and Giles would as well.

If only he didn't call me by that damned nickname! thought Angel. _And why Deadboy of all things!? I hated it enough when Mara called me that._

Giles opened up his mouth to say something but was beaten to the punch.

"Uh, could you excuse us for a second," said Urd as she grabbed her sisters' hands and pulled them towards the door. "We just need a little goddess to goddess to goddess chat. Won't take but a second."

Before anyone could reply the trio were through the door.

After a moment Giles took off his glasses and gave them a quick cleaning. "As long as they're doing that I'd like to have a private word with all of you in my office."

Angel, Xander, and Buffy exchanged surprised looks but quickly followed Giles into his office. The librarian closed and locked the door behind them.

"First of all, I know the three of you might have some objections to what I am about to say but please hear me out," began the Englishman.

"I'm sure that since meeting them yesterday you've all been impressed by our new allies and their personalities and abilities. I know I have. However, I must remind you that these women are goddesses. They're beings from another plane that don't conform to the same rules as you and I. We must be careful."

"Hey, whoa, whoa!" exclaimed Xander. "You think they're badguys?! No way! After what Belldandy did for me! No way! I got to know Urd and Skuld last night too and there's no way any of them are evil!"

"I'm not saying they're evil, Xander," refuted Giles. "There is a sense of goodness coming from them that is almost palatable. What I am saying is that though they're good we must not forget that they are extremely ancient and powerful beings."

"The Norns were said to control fate itself," reminded Angel. "I still don't get all this 'a computer runs the universe' stuff, but I've run across some goddesses in my time and from what I sense Giles is on the money about how old and powerful they are."

"Indeed," nodded the Englishman. "Xander, Buffy, I know you may feel a sisterly sort of bond to our guests, but I just want both of you to remember to be careful around them."

"Since neither Xander or I have a sister I'm sure we'll be fine," said Buffy. "I really think you're overreacting on this one, Giles."

"You may be right," sighed Giles. "But good or not their presence means we are dealing with beings and powers on a level we've never encountered before. I just want all of you to be safe."

"Okay, okay, Giles," grumbled Xander. "We get the message. Now stop beating that dead horse before it gets up and tries to bite your head off."

"And on that lovely image let us go back to the library and try and come up with a plan while we wait for our guests to finish their conversation," said Giles.

With that, the four returned to the library.

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> Outside the library the goddesses gathered, Urd looking unusually grim.<p>

"Urd, what is so important that we had to come out here to talk?" asked Belldandy. "I think barging out like that was a bit rude."

"The main reason I did it was because we need to talk. All of us," replied Urd. "Talk about how you were acting in there."

"Belldandy wasn't doing anything wrong in there!" flared Skuld.

"Wrong," retorted Urd as she looked at Belldandy. "Sis, I saw the look on your face in there when they were talking about killing Mara."

It was taking everything you had not to yell out at them about how wrong that would be."

Belldandy was silent and turned her head from Urd. Her sisters looked at her intently. Eventually the goddess nodded.

"Its true. I understand that destroying demons is sometimes necessary. Killing them may seem like the only thing to ever do with demons for Buffy and her friends. What with being the Slayer and living on the Hellmouth I don't begrudge her and the others for feeling that way.

"But I do not think that's the way to solve this! Urd, you know Mara much better than even I do. I know that you believe she still has some good in her. Let us try and appeal to that part of her. If we succeed then we can end all this without anyone getting hurt."

Skuld and Belldandy looked at Urd expectantly. After several long moments the eldest goddess simply shook her head. "I wish I could believe that, sis. By the Almighty, I wish I could. But we all saw Mara last night. In all the time I've known her she's never been that vicious and cruel. Skuld might have been right on this one. Mara may finally have crossed that line where there is no coming back from true evil. If that's the case and she's mucking with the Hellmouth we may have no choice but to stop her. Permanently."

"Urd, you can't mean that!" gasped Belldandy.

"The hell I don't mean it!" snapped Urd. "The universe was almost destroyed by the Lord of Terror partly because of me. I'll be damned before I let something like that happen again!

"We're all bound by our oaths as goddesses to defend the Almighty's creation no matter the cost and I swear that's what I'll do! Even if it means killing the person who was the best friend I've ever had."

As she finished speaking Urd slammed her fist sideways into a wall in frustration. The concrete cracked slightly and again silence reigned over the goddesses.

After what seemed like an eternity Urd took a deep breath and brushed some hair from in front of her face. "Sorry I went off on you two like that. You didn't deserve that. I guess I'm not as over that Lord of Terror thing as I thought. I was out of line."

Skuld opened her mouth to try and comfort her sister but I was Belldandy who spoke first.

"No, you're right."

Urd and Skuld turned to look at their sister. Belldandy's face was now strong and solid with strength and resolve.

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An iron fist in a velvet glove, thought Urd.

"When we were having our final battle with the Lord of Terror there was a moment when I hesitated. That hesitation almost cost us the

universe. I won't let that happen again," said Belldandy

"What you said is harsh but correct, Urd. We have a duty as goddesses to protect this world. If that duty means killing someone who would bring destruction to this plane then so be it. If Mara does become the sort of threat to the universe that the Lord of Terror was, we will have no choice but toâ€¦"

The goddess hesitated. But only for a moment.

Determination grew stronger on Belldandy's face. "â€¦no choice but to end her existence!"

Again there was only silence.

Then Urd held her right arm out and down at a slight angle, her palm flat. "All right then, let's make this official. On our oaths as goddesses let's swear that we'll stop Mara no matter the cost."

Belldandy gave a grim nod, an incredibly rare site for the face of one such as her, and placed her right hand on top of Urd's. "No matter the cost."

The elder Norns then looked at Skuld who was hesitating, the shock of the recent conversation still rolling through her mind.

"Look, kiddo, I know this is some pretty intense stuff," said Urd. "But you're old enough to know that being a goddess isn't all peaches and cream. We couldn't have stopped the Lord of Terror without you and we may need you again on this one."

"If we fight this threat together as sisters we can't lose," added Belldandy.

Skuld looked back and nodded. She then placed her right hand atop Belldandy's. "No matter the cost," nodded the littlest goddess.

"Now let's begin the oath," said Urd. "By the Nine Worlds, the Realm Eternal and Heaven itself, I, Urd, Eldest of the Norns and Goddess of the Past, do hereby swear to defend the Almighty's creation no matter the cost for all time."

Then it was Belldandy's turn. "By the Nine Worlds, the Realm Eternal and Heaven itself, I, Verdandi, Middle of the Norns and Goddess of the Present, do hereby swear to defend the Almighty's creation no matter the cost for all time."

Finally Skuld spoke. "By the Nine Worlds, the Realm Eternal and Heaven itself, I, Skuld, Youngest of the Norns and Goddess of the Future, do hereby swear to defend the Almighty's creation no matter the cost for all time."

"Amen!" chorused the goddesses as they gave their touching hands a pump.

Steeled for whatever lay ahead the goddesses returned to the library.

"Is everything all right?" asked Giles.

"Just dandy," replied Urd brusquely. "So what's out next move?"

"At this point our two main priorities must be to figure out what Mara's plan is and her location," said Giles.

"On that first one I'm going to go with the idea that's always popular with new demons in town," said Xander. "Namely, trying to kill Buffy."

Urd shook her head. "Not Mara's style."

"I think Urd's right," added Buffy. "If I was Mara's target she'd have tried to finish me off last night. Plus, she was ranting about the whole world feeling her wrath or some other standard supervillain junk. I'm guessing she's out to destroy the world or something really unoriginal like that."

"Also not Mara's style," said Urd. "But whatever she's up to, I'd say worldwide repercussion are a real possibility."

"There are two other possibilities that we've been able to come up with," informed Giles. "One, objects of great mystical power have the annoying habit of turning up in Sunnydale with disturbing regularity. It's possible such a object is currently in the area and Mara is after it."

"That seems reasonable," mused Belldandy. "Mara did get her hands on the Urn of Mao Za Haxon recently. The results wereâ€|chaotic to say the least."

Giles boggled. "Did youâ€|you say theâ€|the Urn of Mao Za Haxon? Good Lord! That urn is supposed toâ€|"

"Giles!" interrupted Buffy. "Save the rejects from the demon version of Antiques Roadshow for later."

Giles shook off his shock. "Ah, yes, quit right. The other possibility is that since many demons come to Sunnydale that Mara is here to make an alliance of some sort with one of them."

Urd scratched her chin and looked thoughtful. "Mara's normally a loner, but she's got a few flunkies she sometimes uses to help her pull stuff off. I suppose it is possible."

"At this point our main problem is a severe lack of information," said Giles. "If we're to have any hope of stopping Mara we must discover what she's after."

"I know a lot of the underlife types here in Sunnydale," said Angel. "I'll see if there are any new players in town besides Mara. Or if any of the old players have been up to anything unusual in the past day or so."

Urd nodded toward Angel. "Good plan. I've got some contacts of my own that I can speak to. I tried two of them with no luck before I came here last night. But maybe I'll get lucky."

"I can also do some checking," reported Belldandy. "While they don't move in the same circles as Urd's contacts, I do know some people as

well who might be able to help. All of them are well informed."

"I could check HEAVENet for info on Mara. I could also use it to see if anything super magickal is in the area," suggested Skuld."

"Skuld, you know the rules about sharing information like that with humans," warned Belldandy.

"I won't break the rules," assured the little goddess. "Just maybe stretch them a bit. All I really need to call up is Mara's rap sheet and profile and a magickal activities report. That's all pretty low-level stuff."

Belldandy hesitated. "Wellâ€¦|"

"Sis, we're running low on time," reminded Urd. "Skuld's right. That's all low clearance stuff. If there's a problem we can explain ourselves to the Almighty later."

"Uh, question," piped in Xander. "If you guys know the, um, Almighty why not get on the horn and have 'em give Mara a good Old Testament style smiting?"

Urd shook her head. "No dice. All we know is that Mara's in town and up to no good. So is every other demon in this burg. We've got to have proof that we're looking at a catastrophe of universal proportions if we want the Almighty to intervene."

"Hey, Xander, if you want you can help me go over the info I'll get from HEAVENet," said Skuld.

Xander nodded. "Okay, since Willow isn't here we can both fill the role of Research Gal."

"I'll continue to search my books," informed Giles. "There are still several volumes that may be of assistance that I've not had a chance to look at yet."

"Which leaves me to try and track down Faith and fill her in," supplied Buffy. "When we finally pin down Mara I'm thinking an extra Slayer would be really handy."

"Now that we all know what we're to do I suggest we get to it," said Giles. "At this point all we know for certain is that time grows short."

The others all nodded. Without another word Urd and Belldandy vanished. Buffy and Angel looked at each other and headed for the library door together. Once they were gone Giles headed toward the stacks while Skuld and Xander huddled up around a computer.

Time was indeed growing very short.

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Meanwhile, in the former lair of the Master, Mara sat upon the slain vampire's throne holding court. Sydney and the other vamps knelt before the throne each on one knee.

"Good work, my minions," cackled Mara as she casually tossed a small, blue glowing orb up and down in her hand. "Thanks to your little raid I now have all the supplies I need to perform the ritual to unleash the Chaos Burst on the world."

"We're glad you're pleased, mistress," groveled Sydney.

"Of course you are," responded the demon as she suddenly hopped out of the throne. "And since you've all been such good little servants I'm going to show you a little secret about this place. One that, now that the Master is gone, I'd say has been totally forgotten."

The vampire's looked at each other with surprise and anticipation. Though the Slayer had destroyed him almost two years ago, the Master's name and legacy still held a degree of awe to some of Sunnydale's vampires.

"All right, kids, follow me," ordered Mara as she turned and headed into the far recesses of the Master's lair. "Remember, stay in line, don't forget who your buddy is so you don't get lost, and absolutely no flash photography."

As they walked Mara smirked to herself. "Since the Master was a big name in these parts for a long time I'm sure most of you have heard about him. But for the benefit of those of you who may be new to town I'll recap.

"Roughly sixty-two years ago in a church he'd taken over, most likely as a show of irony, the Master tried to perform a ritual that would open the Hellmouth and bring the Great Old Ones back to the Earth. But, in a lucky break for humanity, just as he was in the middle of things an earthquake hit right under Sunnydale. The ground swallowed the Master, the church he was in, and a good part of the city whole.

"Now as anyone can tell you magick is a tricky thing. So I'm sure that you can understand that having a quake hit in the middle of a spell of that magnitude is going to result in something unpleasant."

Mara turned to her henchmen to see if they'd been following what she'd been saying. After a few nods of confirmation Mara continued.

"Once the dust had settled from the quake the Master quickly realized that he was in some trouble. Some quirk of the magick had caused him to become trapped between the two worlds here in this cavern. Kinda like a cork in a bottle."

At this point Mara stopped before a dead end wall and turned to face the group of vampires. "Now, class, who can tell me what the Master did next?"

> "I can," spoke up Sydney. "He was forced to wait sixty years until the stars would be in the right alignment for the Harvest, a ritual that could free him. I hear he spent part of that time sleeping in some big pool of blood or something like that, but I don't know the details on that part."
"Wrong!" shouted Mara. "You think a vampire like the Master is just going to throw up his hands and go 'Oh well, guess I'll wait sixty years. Until then I'll just hang out down here and practice being sinister.'?"

The vamps started to exchange looks amongst themselves. They'd never really thought of things that way.

"Now I'll show that secret I mentioned before," said Mara. "I'll show you what the Master was up to for a good part of the time he was stuck down here."

With that, Mara closed her eyes and began to chant in a tongue none of the vampires had ever heard before. The words of the chant were harsh and clipped and seemed to have a crackle like fire to them.

As Mara chanted the bare wall behind her began to glow a murky shade of purple. After glowing for what seemed like several minutes there was a great purple flash that caused the vampires to cover themselves instinctively. While the flash was happening a great whooshing of air could also be heard.

When the light faded the vamps look up to see Mara standing exactly where she was before. Only now there was a stone archway leading into a pitch black room where there had only been solid wall before. The stones that made up the archway all had foreboding looking runes carved on them. A variety of fetid smells emanated from the new room.

"Welcome to the Master's secret playroom, kids," grinned Mara. "Shall we see what's inside?" Without waiting for reply Mara stepped into the darkness.

The other vamps hesitated. After a moment Sydney gave a deep growl. "Come on, we're about to get to the good stuff!" With that bit of prodding the vamps headed through the archways.

Once the last of the vampires was through the portal they heard Mara say a word in yet another strange language. Light filled the room as a row of torches that had snaked the darkened room burst to life.

Now lit by the torchlight it could clearly be seen that the room was large and dome-shaped. Along the western wall was a row of ten shackles, several of which had human skeletons still chained within them. Skulls and other bones from at least a few other individuals were also scattered along the ground.

But it was what was in the center of the room that grabbed everyone's attention. There lay a huge pentagram made of the same stones that had built the entrance to the room. Splotches of dried blood could still be seen on parts of the stonework.

"Pay attention, leeches. We're at the important part," said Mara once the vamps had been given a chance to take in their surroundings. "As soon as he realized he was trapped the Master started looking for a way other than the Harvest to escape. He discovered that only yards from where he'd fallen in was a spot where the energy from the Hellmouth was particularly strong. That point being where that pentagram currently is, of course.

"So he had his minions dig to that area and construct this room. Here, where the Hellmouth's energy was extra potent, the Master hoped

he could work a spell that would grant him freedom.

'For years the guy tried every spell he could think of, no matter how much of a longshot it was. Or how much blood was needed for the ritual. But it was all to no avail. Nothing less than the Harvest could undo the power of the magick that had trapped him here.

"So the Master cast a combination illusion and sealing spell on this room. Most likely he was just tired of looking at the place and having it remind him of all those failures. That spell worked even better than he could have ever expected. After all, it kept the Slayer and her pals from finding it."

Mara turned to her henchmen as she grinned her most wicked grin. "It will be here at midnight that I'll perform the spell to unleash the Chaos Burst upon the world. Both the goddesses and the Slayer will be crushed by their knowledge of how they failed to defeat me and the pain that failure caused the world."

Mara's face was a model of satisfaction. "Do I know how to have fun or what?"

Most of the vampires nodded and smiled dark smiles of their own. In their minds Mara was truly a great demon.

Sydney, however, looked almost bored. "Are you done pontificating yet?"

Mara gave the female vampire a look that could have melted steel. "What did you say!?"

"I asked if you were done shooting off your mouth yet," replied Sydney, clearly unimpressed by Mara's glare.

"Oh, someone is looking for a up close and personal encounter with a DustBuster," growled Mara as she moved toward the female vamp. "I'll be only too happy to oblige."

The other vampires skittered out of Mara's way. They didn't know what had come over Sydney, but they knew for sure that they wanted no part of it or Mara's wrath.

Black magick energy cracked around Mara in an aura as she closed in on the one who'd insulted her. "Get ready for pain, you little bitch!"

"I was going to say the same thing," said Sydney with a smirk as nasty as any Mara had ever worn.

Just as the demon was ready to let loose a magickal volley that she was sure would obliterate the vampire red energy flared in Sydney's eyes. Before Mara could react the crimson energy roared from Sydney's eyes and hit her full in the chest.

Mara was tossed halfway across the room and landed hard. Though burning pain racked her body the demon found the strength to quickly stand.

The other vamps had decided to cower in a corner until what was going on became clear.

"Whatâ€|howâ€|How the hell did you do that?" demanded Mara, her face now sporting several scrapes and a split lip.

"I'm no lowly vampire, demon," replied Sydney in an arrogant voice. "Shall I show you who and what I truly am?"

"Get on with it, dammit!" snapped Mara. The demon burned with the desire to attack, but knew that would be foolish given the facts that her opponent was clearly very strong and that Mara really didn't know who or what she was dealing with.

Sydney made an amused noise. "Very well. I was getting damn tired of groveling to you anyway."

With that the red energy flared again in Sydney's eyes. But this time it grew to cover her entire body. Mara watched for several seconds until she let out a huge gasp.

"You!"

"Yes, me."

"Butâ€|There's no wayâ€|you're supposed to beâ€|" stuttered Mara.

"Yes, I know. But I was able to find a way out of that situation for the time being. Now, Mara, I want to make you an offer."

"An offer?"

"Yes. Though we are very different there is one thing we have in common. A desire we both share. Am I not right?"

Mara nodded. "Yeah, I guess there is one thing we'd both like to see happen. But that isn't supposed to--"

"Such things be damned! This goal is as dear to my heart as I am sure it is to yours. Of all the beings in creation I'm sure only you can come close to knowing how I feel. Let us unite and get back that which was cruelly taken from us so very long ago."

The demon hesitated. "Do you really think we can do this?" asked Mara.

"I have been planning this for more time than I can count. With your help this plan can be achieved. The universe itself will shake with the repercussions."

"And the gods themselves will know dread!" sneered Mara.

Mara's conversation partner smiled. _At last, the final stages of my plan are coming to fruition._

--

Mara then let loose a cackle that echoed loudly through the Master's former lair. Underneath the cackling a far fainter, but just as malevolent, laugh could also be heard.

**

To Be Continued

** ****

****Author's Notes****: Aren't I a jerk to leave you hanging like that? Heh, hehâ€|

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed some of the things that came to light in this chapter. Don't worry, I still have many more surprises in store.

Now for some story ruminations. For whatever reason some people like reading stuff like that. So who am I to deny them?

I guess that if I had to describe this chapter in one word it would be 'hardcore'. The main example of this being the goddesses' vow in regards to Mara. Now I want to make it totally clear that none of them want to kill Mara. They are, however, willing to do that if all else fails and it looks like the world might be in true danger.

For anyone who thinks the goddesses' wold never kill just look at the _Terrible Master Urd_ trade. When Keiichi is possessed by the Lord of Terror and about to destroy the universe Urd yells to Belldandy "We have to kill him! ****We have to!****"

Luckily, Belldandy finds a way to free Keiichi, but I doubt the goddesses expect to get so lucky should they find themselves in a similar situation.

Also, I seem to recall an OMG story where Belldandy cheerfully lectures Skuld on the proper etiquette to use during a duel to the death. It was really funny in terms of that story, but it also showed a slightly darker side in the OMG world that I found intriguing.

I also got the same feeling when I watched _Ah! My Goddess: The Movie_. There we got to see the goddesses doing combat for the fate of the universe and again, a slightly darker picture of the OMG world.

Lastly, while Kosuke Fujishima never really does anything in regards to this in the manga, I think it is important to remember that the Norns come from the war-like Norse culture. Myth says that the Norns were neutral in all things, but the OMG world doesn't follow the myths much. I tried to bring the goddesses back to those Norse roots somewhat in this story, but I too prefer to gloss over the historical neutrality idea.

I like the idea that the goddesses can kick some ass if they want to. Just look at how they beat the Lord of Terror. I really think that a bit of a warrior side really adds something very cool to the characters.

I also wanted to use this part of the story to drive home the way different ways the Scoobies and the goddesses deal with demons. Buffy and co. simply kill them. The goddesses, usually Belldandy, try to understand their adversaries and appeal to the good within them. The clash between these differing views adds some nice tension to things, IMO.

One thing I realized as I was writing this chapter was that I'd explained how I came up with the story's title, but not the story itself. So for anyone who cares this is how it happened.

This all got started when I read Chibi-Dave's fanfic "Akane the Vampire Slayer". By the title I'm sure you can guess part of what happens. The story in brief is that Faith dies from the wounds she got while fighting Buffy and Akane is called as the next Slayer. But all is not well in Nerima. Mousse and Shampoo have become vampires. After reeking some havoc that not all of the _Ranma ½_ crew survive, they head to Sunnydale to set themselves up as the next Big Bad. Ranma, Akane and her Watcher, Dr. Tofu, follow and they end up working with Buffy and company to put an end to things.

A lot of other really cool things happen in the story but I won't say anyone more. Go read it for yourself. The story is on Fanfiction.net or you can just use your favorite search engine to find it.

Anyway, the main thing about that fic was that it showed me that you could mix _Buffy_ and anime and have it work. So I started ticking off some anime shows that I liked to see if anything clicked.

Ranma ½? It had already been done and done well. No point in going there.

Sailor Moon? There were elements from the shows that did click. Mostly the idea of a teenage girl trying to deal with her destiny and lots of monsters with some help from her friends.

But to me magical girls and Slayers just don't mix. There's also the language barrier to get past. I really hate fanfics where Japanese characters end up in America and somehow speak perfect English. IIRC, Sailor Venus is the only one of the Inner Senshi fluent in English. Though I'm sure Mercury could get by just fine.

As for the Outer Senshi, well, you never really know anything with them. I'd say speaking English is a strong maybe with Neptune and Uranus, a most likely with Pluto, and not likely with Saturn. I'm also pretty sure Tuxedo Mask spoke decent English. In the fifth season he was supposed to go and study in America for a time, IIRC.

Anyway, while there were some elements of the shows that I thought could mix I decided to just forget it. There were already way too many bad _Buffy_/_Sailor Moon_ crossovers out there and I didn't feel like going and messing around in that swamp.

Plus, while _Sailor Moon_ is the show that got me into anime, watching it just doesn't give me the same kick as it used to. Though the show remains special to me, my tastes as a fan have grown away from that area. I just didn't think I could go back and write good _Sailor Moon_.

BTW, for the record, my favorite Senshi are Jupiter, Mercury, Uranus

and Pluto in that order.

Next, _Slayers_ come to mind. I actually have some ideas on that one that I like. Consider _Buffy_/_Slayers_ on my ****To Write Someday**** list.

And then I hit _Oh My Goddess!_. When that crossed my mind something clicked. I remember thinking something like "Hey, the Hellmouth attracts demons. And Mara's a demon. What if the power of the Hellmouth drew Mara to Sunnydale?"

My first idea for the story was just the Scoobies Vs Mara with the goddesses not being in the story much at all. I tossed that idea out pretty quick. If I only used Mara it really wouldn't be much of a crossover, would it?

So then it became the goddesses and the Scoobies trying to stop Mara from messing up Sunnydale. But then I realized that the goddesses had handled Mara fine by themselves lots of times. Why would they suddenly need help?

Thus the idea of a behind the scenes villain was born. That also got me working up ratcheting Mara up a few levels as a villain.

And there you have it.

Okay, reference-explaining time! Not really much this time around.

—

"As a wise comic book character named Cable often says 'What is, is.'

—

Cable is a character whose book was spun out of the _X-Men_ universe and is published by Marvel Comics. For years Cable was seen as an embodiment of everything that was wrong with comics in the 90s. His origin was the epitome of convoluted _X-Men_ continuity and contained clones, time travel, and alternate futures. Not to mention Cable seemed to be one of the first of many 90s characters who wore absurd amounts of armor, carried a ridiculous amount of weapons, believed that the ends justified the means, and always seemed to be in need of a shave. In short, just about everything that was wrong with the "grim and gritty" trend in 90s comics.

Lucky for Cable in the last few years his book has been handled by several very talented writers who've stripped away all the crap and turned _Cable_ into a book about the coolest, toughest soldier ever and his efforts to forge a better future for mankind than the one he grew up in. Give the book a shot sometime.

The persecution of Christians in Japan that Giles mentions is little known in the West, but very real part of Japanese history. I tossed that reference in as a slight homage to the awesome samurai anime _Ruroni Kenshin_. That show featured a story arc that dealt with the "Hidden Christians", Japanese Christians who hid their faith for fear of reprisal when Japan's ban on the religion. The ban started in 1587 and was lifted in 1873.

The "Christian Saga" as many fans of Ruroni Kenshin call it, while not as good as the Tokyo and Kyoto arcs of the series, is a compelling and interesting look at religion, martyrdom, revenge, faith and what these things mean to people. I think that even people who, like me, aren't religious will find the story thought provoking.

The story of the Oystan family is clearly something I made up. I did it mostly to show and drive home the idea of all the broken lives Angel left behind him when he was evil.

The idea of him having blank spots in his memory after coming back from that demon dimension is something else I made up. I'm actually surprised that no one ever called me on it before. But we all saw how messed up Angel was when we first returned to Earth. This story is set fairly soon after that, so it seemed reasonable to me that he might not be totally healed from his experience. Plus, it gave me a reason for him not to remember who Mara was. ;)

—

As a matter of fact, it was the Oystan's who compiled most of the information the Watchers have on Drusilla, Spike, Darla, and Angel. I even read some of what they wrote to Buffy and the others, Angel, when we first learned about you and Spike.

—

This is just a little idea that hit me as I was writing. After all, someone had to gather all that info on Angel and that others. You can see Giles doing the reading he mentions in the episodes "Angel" and "School Hard".

—

"Since neither Xander or I have a sister I'm sure we'll be fine," said Buffy.

—

Gee, what Buffy character could I possibly be making a (hopefully) ironic reference to here?

The way the goddesses placed their hands on top of each other's and made that vow was a slight homage to part of the origin for the superhero team the Fantastic Four.

> Mara did get her hands on the Urn of Mao Za Haxon recently. The results wereâ€|chaotic to say the least.

— —

The results were the Lord of Terror taking over Urd and almost destroying the universe. All hail Belldandy, master of understatement!

— —

_ "Giles!" interrupted Buffy. "Save the rejects from the demon version _of Antiques Roadshow_ for later."_

--

Antiques Roadshow is a popular PBS program where ordinary people bring it junk from around their homes to get it professionally appraised. My grandpa is a big fan of the show so I tossed this in as a little tip of the hat to him.

Mara's story about the Master is once again something I just totally made up. But it does make sense to me that he wouldn't just sit on his butt and wait sixty years until the Harvest. If anything the Master was a doer. Plus, I just really liked the idea that there were still secrets down in the Master's lair that Buffy and the others never knew about. Just what else might be laying around down there? I wonderâ€|

BTW, that whole sleeping in a pool of blood thing that Sydney mentions can be seen in "Welcome to the Hellmouth". I guess the Master was supposed to be sleeping in that thing before his minion, Luke, had him rise up out of it. That whole bit never was explained.

Anyway, stay tuned, people. The best is yet to come!

8. A Song From the Heart

Los Angeles, California

It was Saturday night in L.A. and as usual the whole city was jumping. Like many clubs across the City of Angels the karaoke club known as Carasis was no exception. Lorne, the club's flamboyant demon owner, was hustling around chatting with the patrons and checking with the staff while a large purple Ginzalbu demon was up on stage starting into a rendition of "Even Cowgirls Get the Blues." The fact that Ginzalbu demons have four mouths promised to make things interesting to say the least.

Since all seemed in order for the moment Lorne decided to take a short break. He plopped down the bar and nodded to the bartender. "I'll have a Bloody Mary, Bruce."

"Comin' up, boss," replied the bartender who quickly mixed the drink and sat it before the green-skinned demon in record time. Lorne gave a nod of thanks and took a sip. The drink was perfect. The god of demon nightclub owners (there actually was one) had certainly smiled on Lorne the day he'd hired Bruce.

"You fix a fast drink there, fella," said a sexy voice, suddenly. "Think you could whip me up a Blue Hawaii?"

"Sure thing, miss."

Wait a secondâ€|I know that voice, Lorne thought. He looked over to his right to see that Urd was now sitting in what a moment ago had been an empty seat.

The goddess then turned and flashed Lorne a smile that any number of

Hollywood starlets and starlet wannabes would have killed for. "Heya, Lorne. Long time no see."

"Urd!" exclaimed the Host, happily. "I haven't seen you in an age. Where've you been hiding that pretty face and sweet voice of yours lately?"

"In the land where karaoke reigns supreme," replied the goddess as she took a sip of Blue Hawaii Bruce had just placed in front of her. "Namely, Japan."

"I know you really get around but that's a bit off the beaten path. And why have you been there so long? Don't tell me you couldn't find some time to come by and do a duet or two with your ol' pal Lorne."

"I really wish I could have," sighed Urd. "But Belldandy got herself into an interesting situation over in Japan. Nothing bad mind you, but one where she just couldn't get by without the aid of her lovely and wise big sister. I went to help her out and well, stuff happened and I ended up staying longer than I was planning to. Then Skuld showed up and more things happened. So we're all staying with this guy in Japan for the time being. It's a quite life, but I kinda like it."

The Host arched his eyebrows. "Really? 'Quite' was never a word I associated with you, sweetie."

"Yeah, I always have been more of a 'Rock the Casaba' sort. But don't you worry, I still have my fun."

"I'm sure you do. But I don't need to hear you sing to tell that you've got something on your mind. Come on, pumpkin, tell ol' Lorne what's bothering you. That's what you came for, right?"

"I guess the answer to that would be yes and no," sighed Urd. "The problem is Mara, Lorne. I think she's finally crossed the line."

The Host frowned. "And that would be the 'she's done something so bad we're going to have to kill her this time' line, right?"

Urd nodded her head soberly.

Lorne heaved a sigh and took a deep sip from his drink. "Damn," he cursed after a few long, silent moments. "I really hoped Mara might be one of those demons who might choose to turn away from evil. She was a regular around here for a while just after this place opened. Whenever I'd read her as she sang I'd see this big gray area in her heart. I've never seen anything quite like that with any other demon that's ever set foot in here."

"On the other hand, when she was in here she was usually doing business with someone from Wolfram and Hart. They're into some very nasty stuff. I hate to say it, but if Mara was working with them maybe this was inevitable."

"I don't believe in the inevitable," snorted Urd. "It's too much like giving up. And who are Wolfram and Hart?"

Lorne cocked his head toward a table where a man and woman sat with a

demon that looked like a humanoid puffer fish. The man and the demon where busy talking but the woman was taking a sip of her drink. As she did so she caught site of Urd looking at them. She gave the goddess a cold look before returning to her companions' conversation.

"Wolfram and Hart are a lawfirm that specialize in all things demonic. They're a real power in this town and quite a few demon dimensions. That's Lindsay McDonald and Lilah Morgan, two of their brightest up-and-comers. I recommend staying out of their way. Mara's not the only powerful friend they have."

"Who's the sushi bar reject with them?"

Lorne shrugged. "I haven't had the chance to meet the fugu fellow yet. Though when I wandered past their table a few minutes ago I heard him say something about wanting to sing 'Caribbean Queen' later."

"The Almighty save me from bad 80s music and polkas," grumbled Urd.

"You and me both, kitten," nodded the Host. "I wish I knew something about Mara that could help avoid this, Urd, I really do. But I got nada for you."

"I figured as much. I do know that Mara's in a town by the name of Sunnydale about two hours north of here. Have you heard anything about that place lately?"

Lorne allowed himself a chuckle. "The day I don't hear something about Sunnydale in this place I'll take out a full-page ad in the Los Angeles Times. What with that Hellmouth and all, Sunnydale is to demons what Ft. Lauderdale is college students."

Urd took a long sip from her drink. "I've been to Ft. Lauderdale a few times. Honestly, I think the city would be better off with demons. They're far less prone to puking in public."

"True enough. Though now that you've brought up Sunnydaleâ€|"

"Yeah?"

Lorne frowned and gave Urd a serious look. "I've heard in the last few days from some folks that someone powerful set up shop in Sunnydale recently and that they're planning something really big and nasty."

"Mara?" quizzed Urd.

"It's possible," shrugged Lorne. "But whoever it is, they're someone to watch out for."

The Host looked at his drink more a minute and then back at the goddess. "This situation with Maraâ€|you're certain it's really that bad?"

Urd's eyes fell to the bar and her face became still. "Yeah, it's really that bad," she said softly.

"Wanna talk about it?"

> "No. But I think you'll understand as soon as you read me. Speaking of whichâ€¦" The goddess then downed her drink in one long gulp. Lorne looked on with a mix of worry and mild surprise.<p>

Once she was finished Urd stood and stretched. "That's better," she said, a bit of cheer now firmly back in her voice. "Angst isn't my style and I've had enough of it for one day. Now it's time to sing."

"That's the spirit, kiwi," encouraged Lorne as he stood. "I know things look bad now but I'm sure you'll find a way to pull through. You've always had that knack about you."

"True. Here's hoping it still holds," smiled the goddess. "I'm gonna need it."

"Our large purple friend up on stage seems to be finishing up so let me go up and introduce you."

"Lead the way, maestro."

With that, the demon and the goddess headed to the stage.

The Ginzalbu demon was all grins, four of them, as he climbed off the stage. Lorne gave him a polite nod before hopping up on stage himself with Urd just a few steps behind.

"All right, let's give it up for Ewer of the Skullsmasher tribe!" said the Host. "That little ditty almost had me shouting, 'Shane! Shane! Come back, Shane!'"

Several people in the audience who were fans of westerns clapped and whistled.

"Everyone, you're all in for a treat tonight," continued Lorne. "An very dear and very talented friend of mine is here tonight to make her return to the stage of Carasis after far too long. Some of you long-time regulars are sure to remember this lovely little songbird. So without further adieu I give you, from the Golden Realm of Asgard, eldest of the Norns and goddess of the Past, the one and only Urd!"

Several of Carasis' regulars did recognize Urd and let out enthusiastic cheers. A good number of the club's other patrons had heard of the goddess by reputation. They gave polite applause and began whispering amongst themselves as to what the presence of one of the Norns could mean. While they chose not to say anything Lindsay McDonald and Lilah Morgan also clapped as they exchanged slightly worried glances.

"Hey, do they have cocktail weenies here?" asked their fish-like companion. "I just love cocktail weenies! Oh, and can I get another Zima?"

The pair managed to avoid rolling their eyes before Lindsay signaled a waiter.

Urd took the microphone from Lorne and quickly whispered her choice

of song in his ear. The green-skinned demon smiled, nodded and headed off stage.

Urd then stepped into the spotlight and gave the audience a dazzling smile. "Hello, everyone. It's great to be back at Carasis! Since this is my first time here in a while I've decided to sing a song that's been a favorite of mine since the early 60s when I spent one very crazy weekend in Las Vegas with the Rat Pack. Whatever dimension or plane of existence you're from I'm sure you know this tune. It's "Fly Me to the Moon" by Mr. Entertainment himself and a favorite drinking buddy of yours truly, Mr. Frank Sinatra!"

As Urd finished her words the first notes of the song began and the Sinatra fans in the crowd cheered heartily. The goddess smiled again and began to sing.

—

Fly me to the moon and let me play among the stars

And let me play among the stars.

Let me see what spring is like on Jupiter and Mars.

In other words, hold my hand!

In other words, darling, kiss me.

Fill my heart with song,

and let me sing forever more.

You are all I long for, all I worship and adore.

In other words, please be true!

In other words, I love you!

Fly me to the moon and let me play among the stars

And let me play among the stars.

Let me see what spring is like on Jupiter and Mars.

In other words, hold my hand!

In other words, darling, kiss me.

Fill my heart with song,

and let me sing forever more.

You are all I long for, all I worship and adore.

In other words, please be true!

In other words, I love you!

—

As the final notes of the song faded a roar of applause came from the audience. Even Lindsay, Lilah and their fish-like client were appauling with genuine enthusiasm.

"Too bad the Norns are good aligned deities," said Lindsay to his co-worker. "Otherwise the boys down in the entertainment division would be knifing each other in the back to sign her."

"The entertainment division fellows do love their sharp objects," sighed Lilah. "We're still a little short on staff down there due to all the disemboweling that happened last month when we were getting that boy band from Orlando to sign with us. I'm all for the occasional decapitation or whatever to move up the corporate ladder, but the entertainment division guys really need to learn some restraint. We've had to replace the carpet down there due to massive bloodstains twice this year."

"Ain't Hollywood a bitch?" smirked Lindsey.

"Wouldn't have it any other way," grinned Lilah in reply.

"You know, give her some scales, fins, maybe a tail—that girl wouldn't be too bad lookin'," said the demon as he shoved a claw full of cocktail weenies into his mouth.

The two attorneys gave each other weary looks.

Once the clapping was done Urd gave a bow, put the microphone back in its stand and headed off stage where Lorne was waiting. "That was stupendous, sweetie. Frankie himself would be proud."

"Thanks, Lorne," said Urd. "So, what have you got for me?"

At that the Host frowned. "Not as much as you'd like, I'm sure. All I can really tell you is that the tough stuff you're going through right now—it ain't over yet. Not by a longshot. This thing between you and Mara is going to come to a head real soon. But how it's going to end I haven't got a clue. The ol' magic eight ball is coming up hazy on that one."

"Damn," grumbled Urd as her eyes fell sadly to the floor. "I was hoping for better news than that."

Lorne placed a comforting hand on the goddess' should. "Me too, muffin. Me too."

Urd ran a hand through her hair and took a deep breath. "Well, at least things will be over soon between Mara and me. One way or another."

"I hate to be the bearer of even more bad news but there's something else," said Lorne. "It's vague. But I'm getting the sense that there's something big going on behind the scenes of all this stuff that's happening in Sunnydale. Who, what or how I don't know. All I can say for certain is that there's more going on than meets the eye."

"Well, that does at least confirm some of the weird vibes my sisters and I have been feeling since we arrived in Sunnydale and what you told me earlier," replied Urd. "Mara's been smarter and more sadistic

than I've ever seen her. If she's working for some big nasty or worse, being manipulated by one, then that would explain a lot."

"Do you think you might be able to find, you know, a less fatal way to deal with Mara now?" asked Lorne, earnestly.

"I hope so. But whatever the case, if Mara's become a threat to the whole world then we'll have no choice. Belldandy, Skuld and I have already made a holy vow to kill Mara if we have to. No matter what I'll keep that vow."

Urd closed her eyes, frowned and rubbed her forehead for a moment. "I'm a goddess and she's a demon. A long time ago that really didn't matter. Now it's the only thing that does matter."

Lorne stepped forward and gave the goddess a hug. After a moment Urd returned it. "Don't give up on Mara just yet, kiddo. I think there's more good in her than she'd ever admit to herself. But if it comes down to itâ€¦"

Urd broke the hug and quickly wiped two tears from her eyes. "I'll do what I must," said the goddess, resolve clear in her voice. "I don't like playing the warrior as much as I used to in the old days, but I still know how to do what I have to do it win in a fight. No more tears. This thing between me and Mara ends tonight!"

"I can't think of much else to say in a situation liked this except say good luck," responded Lorne. "Whatever happens I know you'll do the right thing."

"Thanks, Lorne. I'd better get back to Sunnydale. It's time to end this thing." Urd blew her friend a kiss before vanishing.

"Godspeed, kitten," sighed the Host.

It was then that Lorne noticed that the fish-like demon was standing on stage fidgeting a bit. The club owner quickly dashed to the stage and had a quick, whispered conversation with the other demon. He then scooped up the microphone and smiled at the audience. "Sorry for the delay, folks. You know how it can be when you're talking with an old friend. Anyway, up next we have Owcarî from the Demon Sea of Idyru'mak. Tonight he's going take us back to the golden age of pastel shirts, the 1980s, with the tropic sounds of Billy Ocean's "Caribbean Queen." Let's give it up for him!"

Lorne then passed then mic and skittered off stage.

"So, yeah," began Owcarî as he looked out over the audience. "Can I get a shout out from everyone in the crowd who's from one of the Cursed Ocean realms? Come on, I know your out there!"

The only respondent was octopus-like creature sitting at a back table who raised three tentacles and gave a short, embarrassed "Wahoo."

Any further monologue the demon might have had was cut off by the music starting. This was a somewhat mixed blessing since Owcarî's singing voice sounded a lot like broken glass being put into a blender. Many in the crowd openly groaned and covered their ears. Those that had ears and appendages to cover them with

anyway.

Lindsay and Lilah, however, were smiling and clapping along though their efforts were clearly forced.

"Where did we find this idiot?" whispered Lindsay.

"No clue," shrugged Lilah. "But Holland said to take him out on the town and treat him like royalty. So that's what we'll do because otherwise the senior partners will have our souls roasting over an open fire by dawn. And that's if they're feeling merciful. Which would be a first for them."

Lindsay could only sigh. "You know, Lilah, days like this I really hate my job."

Lilah cast a wary look around the room before turning back to her co-worker and giving a small nod. "Yeah, days like this, so do I."

Nobody ever said being evil was easy.

**

To be continuedâ€¦

** ****

****Author's Notes****: Hey, people. As usual it's bit far too long since updates. But I've been living overseas the last few months so fanfic pretty much had to go on the backburner. I've actually had this bit above lying around for a while. I kept promising myself I'd add more to it before I posted it, but in addition to all the new pressures that came with going abroad I found I just haven't been in the mood to write of late. So I figured I'd put this up to show the readers that I am indeed still alive. I'll be returning to the US soon so once that's done hopefully my productivity will pick back up.

Anyway, now onto the Easter eggs.

I bet a lot of you were surprised to see Lorne turn up. It was never said just how long he'd been in L.A. before we met him, so I figured there was no reason Lorne couldn't have been around running his club while Angel was still in Sunnydale. After all, in the Buffy timeline he's due to leave for LA in a few months. Thought it will be a year after that before he meets Lorne for this first time.

So with that in mind I decided to take this as a chance to play with some of the characters from the Angel TV show. Lindsay and Lilah are of course important characters in Angel's life. So I wanted to play with them a bit. Especially Lindsay. I always liked his character and his recent return to the show was actually what finally convinced me to post this little snippet.

I wish there were a way to work characters like Gunn, Wes, Fred, Conner and Eve into this story. But with those characters being where they are at this point in time that's just not workable. But hey, I got you Lorne, didn't I? Everyone loves Lorne!

I actually met Andy Halett who plays Lorne once at Comic Con International in San Diego back in 2001. I even go to hear him sing. Let me tell you, Andy ****is**** Lorne. Their personalities are pretty much one and the same. Andy signed a picture for me with the words "Keep on singing!" Needless to say, as an _Angel_ fan that picture means a lot to me.

Lorne having a history with both Urd and Mara just seemed like a natural fit to me. I like to think of Urd as a sort of "eternal party girl." My vision of Urd is that if you look at history close enough you'll see that wherever and whenever something cool and fun was happening Urd was there in the background somewhere. Hence my references to Urd knowing _The Beatles_ and Frank Sinatra. So given its atmosphere Carasis seems like just the sort of place Urd would love and Lorne just the sort of person Urd would have as a friend.

—

Yeah, I always have been more of a 'Rock the Casaba' sort.

—

"Rock the Casaba" is a song by the wildly influential British punk band _The Clash_.

—

I really hoped Mara might be one of those demons who might choose to turn away from evil. She was a regular around here for a while just after this place opened. Whenever I'd read her as she sang I'd see this big gray area in her heart. I've never seen anything quite like that with any other demon that's ever set foot in here.

—

Strange as it may sound, I don't consider _Brimstone Raising_ to be a crossover at its core. At heart, BR is a story about Urd and Mara that just happens to have Skuld, Belldandy and the cast of _Buffy the Vampire Slayer_ in it. That whole best friend/enemy dynamic Urd and Mara have going on is part of what makes them my favorite OGM characters.

Taking that situation and pushing it to the extreme is, in a way, what this story is about. As I've said before, part of the fun of this story was ratcheting Mara up to the level of a Buffy Big Bad. The counterpoint to that is Urd having to take up some of the aspects of her duties as a goddess she may not like, but will follow none the less. It's that sort of tension that makes for good storytelling IMO.

—

The Almighty save me from bad 80s music and polkas," grumbled Urd.

—

Fans of the OMG manga will know that polkas cause Urd to immediately fall asleep if she hears one. Mara, amusingly, suffers from a similar

problem in that she starts to dance if she hears disco music.

—

"That little ditty almost had me shouting, 'Shane! Shane! Come back, Shane!'"

—

Lorne is referencing the classic cowboy movie Shane.

As I said earlier in my notes, "Fly Me to the Moon" was one of Sinata's biggest hits, the end song to my favorite anime of all time, Neon Genesis Evangelion, and the song Urd sang when she first arrived in L.A. several chapters ago.

I had a heck of a time picking what song Urd would sing. It was actually going to be Madonna's "Like a Prayer" for a while. Urd and Madonna seem like a natural combo to me. But I thought it over and "Fly Me to the Moon" just seemed to work better in terms of continuity with what had come before so I went with that.

"The entertainment division fellows do love their sharp objects," sighed Lilah. "We're still a little short on staff down there due to all the disemboweling that happened last month when we were getting that boy band from Orlando to sign with us."

Writing about the corporate culture of W&H was more fun than I ever thought it could be. Originally, Lindsay wasn't going to be in the story (I thought to add him later) and Lilah was just going to have a cameo and no lines. But as I was writing I found myself wanting to write those two, even if it was just a little bit. Things just sort of snowballed from there.

I'll let you be the judge of who that boy band from Orlando might be. ;)

—

I'm all for the occasional decapitation or whatever to move up the corporate ladder, but the entertainment division guys really need to learn some restraint.

—

No, Lilah isn't afraid to make heads roll. As a certain W&H bigshot found out the hard way in an episode of Angel.

Owcari originally wasn't even going to have a name in the story. Never mind lines and a little scene all to himself. But I wanted to play some of the demon subculture stuff that we see a lot of on Angel. Plus, it gave me the chance to kinda let my imagination run wild and come with cool sounding names like the Cursed Ocean realms and such. Oh, and Owcar's love of cocktail weenies was a trait I lifted from Homer Simpson. That, combined with a fondness for Zima, seemed to be perfect for creating a dork of demon who would suck at karaoke.

That's all for now folks. As I said, once I get back to America I

expect my productivity to pick up so stay tuned.

9. Lion's Den

About an hour after sundown the goddesses and the Scooby Gang had reconvened at the library to compare notes.

"I beat the crap and bunch of other stuff out of every inhuman lowlife in Sunnydale. Other than a small sense of satisfaction I didn't get much," related Angel. "Just someone new and powerful is in town. Someone even Mr. Trick is willing to kowtow to."

"I think we all know who that is," said Xander. "Nice work, dead boy. Ever consider being a detective?"

Angel mentally winced. "Could you not call me that? I'm over two hundred years old. I'm no boy. Which I guess is something we have in common now."

"Look, Count Leatherpants, I--"

"Guys! Uh, guy and girl, knock it off," interrupted Buffy. "You can take cheap shots at each other after we stop Mara." >Looking chastised both Angel and Xander looked away from the Slayer and muttered short apologies.<p>

"I didn't have any more luck than Angel," continued Buffy. "Faith seems to be MIA. All I was able to find out was that she might be heading to some big party out of town. No idea where though."

Giles frowned and massaged his forehead. "Wonderful. Faith's abilities would have been a tremendous asset in this situation. I fear things have just gotten even more difficult."

"Giles, relax," said Xander. "We've saved the world without Faith before. Yeah, having her here would be a big help. But we'll manage. Besides, this time we've got goddesses on our side. This round Mara's goin' down. Hard."

"You'd better believe she's going down!" snapped Skuld. "It's payback time for that 'Mara Bomb' trick and everything else she's done to all of us!"

Urd and Belldandy said nothing but managed weak smiles.

"Uh, yeah, go team," said Buffy. "Anyway, after I couldn't find Faith I thought a little arm twisting session with Willie the Snitch was in order. I twisted like I was at an old time dance party, but Willie doesn't seem to know anything. He repeated what we've heard about a big new player showing up a few days back." >"He also mentioned some new vamp in town that seems to be working for Mr. Trick. Other than it's a she with a funny accent he doesn't know anything. Not even a name."<p>

"Another problem for another day," sighed Giles. "I've spent the last few hours consulting my books and making some phone calls. All I found were a few more nasty stories about Mara. None of them helpful."

>"My source didn't know anything either," added Urd. "All I got was

yet another repeat of the 'someone new and bad' in Sunnydale line. I gotta say I'm kinda surprised. Mara doesn't normally cause this big a stir. She's got a decent reputation but all this fuss seems a bit much her."

"True," agreed Belldandy. "But Mara has been acting very unusual of late. Perhaps we're not the only ones who've noticed. We've no idea how long Mara has had this more aggressive attitude. Our last confrontation with her was some time ago."

The goddess then frowned slightly. "That said my efforts have born no fruit as well."

"The Oracles?" asked Urd.

Belldandy nodded and Urd shook her head. "The Oracles can be so damn picky about sharing information. Honestly, there's never a helpful seer around when you need one."

"It would seem we've hit a dead end," said Giles. "This is most troubling. If anyone has any suggestions as to what to do next I would be most happy to listen."

No one seemed to have any ideas and silence hung heavily in the room.

The ringing of the phone at the checkout desk made everyone jump a bit. It was long past the time that the school had closed for the weekend. Giles furrowed his brow in puzzlement as he stepped over and picked up the receiver.

"Sunnydale High library, this is Rupert Giles speaking. I'm afraid we're clos--"

"Hiya, English. How's the noggin?" came Mara's voice. "Still hurntin' I hope."

Giles felt some of the blood drain from his face but managed to hold his composure. He lowered the receiver and hissed "It's Mara!" to the others.

"Hey, Prince of Tweed! Put the Slayer on the line. I've got something to say to her."

Anger arose in Giles and he let some of the malice he'd learned to speak with in his Ripper days creep into his voice. "Anything you have to say to Buffy you may say to me, you contemptible, demon harlot. I--"

Giles got no further as Buffy stepped forward and silently held out her hand for the phone. He hesitated.

"I'm the Slayer. I can handle it," said Buffy. The Watcher saw not a hint of fear in the eyes of his Slayer. He gave Buffy the phone without blinking.

"Hello?"

"Yo, Slayer. How's it going? You been having fun pruning Willow and teaching Xander to walk in high heels?"

Buffy clenched the phone tighter but fought down her anger. "Sorry, I've been too busy sharpening my favorite sword. You know, to make it easier to chop off your head and all."

"Oh, scary!" taunted Mara. "But you'll have to find me first."

"We'll find you."

"Actually, my lethal little bleach job, that's what I'm calling you about. You see, ol' Mara is throwing a throw-the-world-into-chaos bash and you and all your little pals are invited. Urd, the goody-goody and the brat too. It's BYOB and if you could pick some French dip on your way over that would be just super."

Buffy felt the urge to gnash her teeth. "Sure thing. I'll even bring a big bag of pretzels. Just tell me where."

"I'm waiting for you where you first died, Slayer," hissed Mara. "Why don't you come on down and see if history repeats itself."

The memory of her death in the Master's lair came rushing back to Buffy like a flash flood. Unconsciously she took a step back and lowered the phone from her ear.

"What's the matter, little girl? Afraid? You should be!" mocked the demon loud enough for the others to hear.

Before Buffy could respond Urd boldly stepped forward and yanked the phone from her hand. "Listen up, Mara!" snapped the goddess. "We're through fooling around here. I don't know what you're planning, but my sisters and I have taken a sacred vow to stop you no matter what. We will not let you threaten the creation of the Almighty! I don't care if I'm destroyed in the process! If I have to I will burn you from the face of the universe myself!"

For a long, pregnant moment there was but silence on the other end of the phone. Then chuckling could be heard which rapidly escalated into Mara's blistering staccato laugh. "So you finally decided to break out your **A** game? It's been ages since I've seen you as Urd the warrior rather than Urd the lazy party girl."

"The bitch is back, Mara," replied Urd, a menace in her voice that Skuld had never heard and could never have imagined coming from her eldest sister. The little goddess felt a chill as cold as the hand of death run down her spine. She would remember that feeling always.

"Oh, this really does feel like old days of battle and blood," said Mara nostalgically. "Ever miss those days, Urd? The time when we and the world were wild and primal and we fought battles all across the realms of creation? Sometimes on the same side and sometimes not. Sad that we never got to face each other one-on-one in combat. I always wanted to see which of us would win. Did you ever wonder about that, Urd?"

"No, I never did," the goddess replied, her voice now soft and pained. "I prefer to think of the better times back in Asgard. Before we had to take up the roles of goddess and demon. Back when we were

fr--"

"Those days are as dead as glam rock," interrupted Mara coldly. "If you wanna stop me from making a really big mess out of this little mud ball that your so-called 'Almighty' is so fond of then you best get moving. The fun starts at midnight!"

Then the line went dead.

"Dammit," muttered Urd and she replaced the receiver. She then slowly turned and looked at her sisters and allies. "It's official. Now we go to war. No quarter. No mercy. No other option than victory."

"Mara's holed up in the Master's old lair," informed Buffy. "We have to assume she's got something nasty waiting to drop on us when we get down there."

"Mara didn't have too much of a problem kicking our asses the last time," said Xander. "She's probably cocky right now. We can use that against her, right?"

"The last time we fought her Mara was smart enough to play divide-and-conquer," reminded Angel. "She separated the most powerful of us with her hex fields and then hit those of us with the least ability to fight back. She has to know we'll be ready for something like that. I think Buffy's right. Mara has something new up her sleeve and she's waiting to spring it on us once we get down there."

"Mara has access to sophisticated demon technology and is well versed in the black arts," added Belldandy. "I concur that she's most certainly setting some sort of trap for us. However, I'm afraid it's impossible to even guess as to what kind of trap it might be."

"Mara has to have know that Belldandy and I were low on juice from punching through the Hexfield the last time we fought," said Urd. "No way is she going to try and duke it out with all of us. I'd say she might have gotten some flunkies to help her out. Either by summoning or recruiting from the local baddie population."

"Whatever or whoever she has on her side we don't have anymore time to worry about it. Mara said she's making her big move at midnight. That doesn't give us much time."

"Then we had best start preparing," advised Giles. "Fortunately, I finished doing maintenance on all of the weapons here at the library just last week."

"I call dibs on that black longsword!" said Buffy. "It goes with my shoes."

"Oh, I want that really cool lookin' mace that Giles almost dropped on his foot that one time," called Xander.

Giles heaved a mental sigh as he went to the book cage, opened it and then opened the weapon lockers. "I don't know if they will be of any help to goddesses, but feel free to avail yourselves of anything in here that you feel will be useful in tonight's battle."

With that the assembled heroes quickly began selecting weapons for themselves. The exception to this was Skuld who hung back. While the other were picking weapons for themselves she pulled her mallet from its place on her back and then pulled a cloth from some unseen pocket in her outfit. She breathed on both ends of the mallet and then quickly polished her weapon.

The little goddess then gave the mallet a few practice swings and smiled in satisfaction. "Yeah! Time for Skuld to kick some booty!"

"Just to be safe everyone check your weapons before we leave," called Giles once everyone had armed themselves. "There are also stakes, holy water and the like in the left locker. Those might be useful so take some if you have room in your pockets."

"And don't forget to use the bathroom before we leave keep your arms inside the bus at all times," quipped Xander as she checked her mace.

Giles gave her a look.

"You know, a bathroom break suddenly seems like a really good idea right now," said Xander as she quickly headed for the door.

"Don't believe everything you see written about you on the stall walls," called Buffy. "I'm sure Cordy only wrote those things because she was having a bad day."

Xander stopped dead and turned to look at the Slayer his mouth agape and a look of growing horror in his eyes.

"Kidding! I'm kidding!"

"Jeez, Buff, give me a heart attack, why don't ya," sighed Xander as she turned and left the library.

A few feet away Angel allowed himself a quick smile as he inspected the blade of the falchion he planned to fight with. _You deserved that for the Count Leatherpants crack_, he thought. _I just wish I'd been the one to think of that. Of course then I'd have to explain why I'd been lurking in the girl's bathroom._

Uhâ€¦maybe it is better Buffy's the one to have pulled that on him.

Not far away, Giles, who had taken a crossbow for himself, watched Belldandy test the weight of a longspear. Satisfied, the goddess gave the spear a short twirl and then stopped to briefly look at the weapon's diamond-shaped tip. "An excellent weapon, Mr. Giles. The person that made this is exceptionally talented."

"The Watchers have many skilled craftsmen on our payroll," the librarian replied. "That one I believe was crafted by one of our senior smiths who resides in Ireland. I'm sure he'd be most gratified to know his work had been praised by a goddess."

"I'm only stating the truth," said Belldandy, her voice pure sincerity. She then gave Giles an appraising look. "If I'm wrong I do apologize, Mr. Giles. But you have a look on your face that says to

me there's saying you'd like to say but don't feel comfortable doing so. Please speak your piece."

Giles gave a little chuckle. "You're most perceptive. I know this is not relative to what is happening tonight but I came across something in my research thatâ€¦well, I doubt I shall ever have the chance to speak to such beings as yourselves again andâ€¦"

Belldandy nodded in understanding. "Ask away. If I am able to I'd be happy to enlighten you."

Giles gave a nod of his own in thanks before speaking. "The reason I was reluctant to ask is because what I found specifically involves the Norns." The Watcher turned and glanced at Skuld who was munching on a candy bar she'd acquired from somewhere.

"After Urd's revelation about the World Tree really being some sort of computer I was willing to believe that the information history has on the Norns might be somewhat flawed. But in many of my books I saw references to Skuld, in addition to being one of the Norns, being a valkyrie; one of the shieldmaidens of Odin who carried the souls of fallen warriors to Valhalla."

Belldandy gave a knowing smile. "And in some of the legends Urd and I are crones as well, correct?"

Giles nodded.

"You ask a complicated question, Mr. Giles. One I'm afraid mortals cannot fully be given the answers to."

"Ah, I see. Well, forget I asked. I just couldn't help--".

Belldandy held up a hand and the librarian stopped in mid-apology. "There's nothing to apologize for. Mr. Giles. Asking is the key to all knowledge."

Belldandy smiled at him again and Giles felt a sense of peace like nothing he'd ever known before wash over him. "It's true that many of the ways of the Higher Realms can't be imparted to mortals. But allow me to tell you this; the old myths are not in some ways far from wrong.

"There is a part of the three of us that is what the old stories make us out to be. There is also a part of us that is nothing more than the young women we appear to be on the surface. As the world changes so do we. You could say weâ€¦reinvent yourselves from time to time."

"Very fitting for goddesses of time," mused Giles.

"I've always thought so," agreed Belldandy. "Urd, being Goddess of the Past, is tied most strongly to what we once were. Skuld, being Goddess of the Future, feels the tie least. She's even forgotten much of what she once was in those days. For the future is best seen through the optimistic eyes of youth. But the knowledge of the old times will come to her when the time is right. Such is our nature. Such is the plan set for us by the Almighty."

Giles was silent, stuck by the profound power of Belldandy's words.

"I see. Thank you for enlightening me. You won't get in trouble for telling me all that, I hope."

"No, no, it's fine," said Belldandy. "That was not sensitive information, I assure you. There is far more to it all than what I've told you. But those details I'm afraid were not meant for mortals."

The goddess turned looked toward Skuld who was still munching away on her candy bar. "Theseâ€|rebirths of ours might sound strange to you but I've come to enjoy them. Being young again is wonderful. It allows me to see the wonder of the Almighty's creation with fresh eyes and rediscover life's joys and surprises again and again."

Giles then turned and looked toward Buffy. Xander had returned and was talking with the Slayer in an excited fashion. He was too far away to hear what had been said, but Buffy smiled and let forth a short round of laughter at some comment of her friend.

The Watcher, even without being privy to the joke, found himself smiling as well. "Young people do have an amazing ability to see and appreciate life. They have such vigor, such energy, suchâ€|hope. That hope is infectious. Sometimes it can even rub off on old fuddy duddies who've spent too much time with books and remind them why tomorrow is worth fighting for."

"Which is as it should be," added the goddess.

Just a few yards away the two young people in question were having their own conversation.

"Another weekend another apocalypse, huh, Buff?" said Xander.

"Yeah, it just doesn't seem like a real Saturday night without a little Armageddon prevention," sighed Buffy. "I swear, I think they'll put 'Buffy Anne Summers. She saved the world. A lot.' on my tombstone someday."

Xander frowned. "Don't go thinking about dying, okay? Think about putting the beatdown on Mara."

"I know that's what I should focus on but the last time I was down there in the Master's lair I died," said the Slayer. "There's nowhere else in the world I'd rather not go. Except maybe to the mall with Cordelia. I did that once and barely escaped with my sanity."

"I went shoe shopping with her once. I know your pain," said Xander. "But the last time you went down there there was some nasty prophecy saying you were supposed to die. That's not the case this time."

"So I'm going to give you a new prophecy to go down there with. Yes, the great seer Xander Harris has had a vision! The Slayer will descend into the earth, kick Mara's ass, restore her friends to normal and have a really fun victory party at the Bronze afterwards. Oh, and just so you know, the visions of the great seer Xander Harris are never wrong."

Buffy grinned broadly and placed a hand on Xander's arm. "I think I like that prophecy," she said. "You know, Xander, you're the one who

sees things the way they are and knows how to get us to lighten up and remember what's important; our friendship. The last few hours, with all that's happened, wellâ€¦I'm really glad to have a friend right now."

"Nice speech, Buffy. Maybe you should lay a few words on the troops. Ya know, get fired up before it's once more into the breach and all that."

Buffy glanced around and saw that the others seemed to have finished checking their gear and were waiting. "Yeah, I guess I could give it a shot."

"Hey, everyone, before we head out there's something I'd like to say," called the Slayer. All heads immediately turned to look at her. "I'm not really much for hero-type speeches so I'll make this quick. It looks like the world is on the line again and the only people who can do anything about it is us. So let's do something. Let's show Mara what happens to anyone who tries to destroy the world in this town. Let's show her what happens to be anyone who hurts our friends."

She glanced at the goddesses. "Friends, new or old."

"Good speech, Slayer," said Urd as she gave the weapon she'd selected, a double-bladed greataxe, a playful tip in Buffy's direction. "Now I think it's time to go. You should lead the way."

Buffy lifted her sword in front of her, focused on it for a moment, lowered it, and then nodded. "Wouldn't have it any other way."

No words were spoken as the Scoobies and the goddesses walked out the main doors of Sunnydale High. Fighting down the chill that had taken hold of her spine, Buffy quickly lead the group to a manhole in back of an office building a few blocks from the school.

"This is it," said the Slayer as she cast a quick look towards Giles. "This is where the Anointed One took me to go fight the Master."

"There are other ways to the Master's Lair that can be accessed from the tunnels under the school. But this is a fastest way," Angel said. "I never knew about this path until Buffy showed it to me and Xander on the way back to the school to finish the Master off."

"The word 'maze' does not even begin to describe what is under this town," muttered Xander.

Urd waved her hand and the manhole cover immediately levitated a few inches before moving over and settling to the ground. "Slayer, you want to take point I take it?" she said in a brisk tone.

Buffy just nodded and began to climb down the opening. A few minutes later the others had climbed down and were making their way swiftly to the Master's lair.

"We're almost there. Eyes and ears extra open," whispered the Slayer a short time later. Quite noises of affirmation were all that could be heard. Moments later the group entered what had been the Master's

throne room only to find it deserted.

"You think Mara went out to rent a movie before destroying the world or something?" asked Xander as she looked around. "I'm up for a Bruce Lee flick after we're done kicking her ass. 'Cause, you know, Bruce Lee, kicking, kicking of assesâ€|they all go together."

"Mara's not gone," said Urd. "She's close, I can almost smell her. Also, if you really care, Mara's more the cowboy movie type. She's a big John Wayne and Clint Eastwood fan. She really digs their tough guy talk."

Just then there was a bright flash of purple light. The assembled heroes moved to cover their eyes but the flash faded in an instant. The illusion covering the Master's hidden room was no more.

"I also like how at the end of those movies there's always a cool showdown," called Mara's voice from the chamber. "It's almost midnight, boys and girls. That's high noon for us demon types. So come on in and let's see what ya got!"

Buffy smiled to herself as she raised her sword. "I think someone needs a reminder that in those movies the good guys always win."

Cautiously the group entered the Master's hidden chamber. Mara stood a few steps from the pentagram on the floor. She wore her battle outfit but stood relaxed with her arms across her chest. Her vampire minions stood a few on each side of her with their game faces on. A few of them hissed at Buffy and Angel entered but they received no reaction.

"So glad you could make it," sneered Mara. "I want all of you to have front row seats for the festivities."

"I left my lighter and glow sticks at home so I'll just have to cheer extra loud," snapped Buffy. "I'm really looking forward to the your funeral part of the show."

Urd shot a hand in front of the Slayer just as she was about to step forward and challenge the demon. "Mara's mine, kiddo. I know she hurt you and your friends bad and you've got every right to want a pound of flesh. But this things between me and Mara goes back further than you can imagine. So for your sake and the sake of your friends let me be the one to handle her. Please."

Buffy hesitated a moment but then nodded. "Do what you have to do to stop her until you can get the passwords to Xander and Willow back to normal. After thatâ€|"

"Understood."

"Oh, so touching," mocked Mara. "Guess we'll finally get to see which of us is tougher after all, Urd."

"Don't think I won't do whatever it takes to stop you," replied Urd as she pointed her great axe in the direction of her former friend. "The great balance between gods and demons may claim my life to preserve the order of things once it's over, but if you force me to I will destroy you, Mara!"

"Just what I've been itchin' to hear!" said Mara gleefully. The demon's right hand fell to her side, made a quick series of gestures and then on the ground beneath the demon's hand a small pentagram of red energy etched itself. From nowhere came a metal sigh like something heavy being lift by a chain. From the pentagram rose the hilt of a sword which Mara lifted quickly and held aloft for all to see.

It was a greatsword with a handle that was wrapped in rough, crimson scales of what clearly had once been some beast of great power. An elaborate fixture with a skull and bones motif attached the blade to the hilt. The blade itself 35 inches long and sharp as a razor's dream. A multitude of runes ran down the blade and then flared red for a moment as Mara grinned viciously.

"Looks like mine the biggest," said the demon to the Scoobies and goddesses who were hanging back, wary of some new trick. "This party is off to a dull start. So let's liven things up." In a crackle of energy a ocher-colored sphere appeared. "It's a little somethin' I've been saving for a special occasion. Who knows what an Orb of Geb is?"

"Geb is the Egyptian god of the earth," answered Giles automatically. "An Orb of Geb is said to have great power over creatures of rock and soil and to vastly increase the power of spells that use the forces of elemental earth."

"Correct!" shouted Mara. "They're also especially useful in certain summoning spells."

The demon then said a few quick words and the orb began to glow with the powerful yellow light. Giles raised his crossbow to take aim at the orb and a Buffy took a step forward but it was too late.

In the space between the demon and her opponents several figures erupted from the ground. It took a moment for the cloud of dirt and dust the newcomers' arrival had caused. Once they could see clearly again the Scoobies and the Norns could saw eight hulking humanoid figures standing before them. The creatures had dark skin much the same color as the Orb of Geb. But pebbles and other small bits of rock protruded from their coarse skin. The creatures' eyes varied in hue but all seemed to be made of beautiful, flawless crystal.

"Earth elementals respond exceptionally well when summoned by an Orb of Geb," said Mara. "They're not much for conversation, but when you want someone pounded into the dirt few do it better."

"Now get them! All of you, get them! It's time to loose chaos upon the earth!"

At the demon's words the elementals and vampires charged the goddesses and the Scoobies. Urd was the first to react and she charged forward. After a few powerful strides she leap into the air, higher than any human ever could, sailed over the hoard and came to a landing a few feet in front of Mara.

"You wanted a fight. You wanted Urd the warrior. You got them, Mara," growled Urd. "Just remember that the gods are fond of destroying people by giving them what they want."

"The gods can go to hell for all I care," retorted the demon. "I just want your blood."

The two then charged each other with ancient war cries on their lips. Their weapons quickly met with a thunderous metal clang that echoed through the chamber.

Meanwhile the tide of fangs and earthen fists was raining down on the other assembled heroes.

Xander, having hung towards the back, had managed to scamper off to the side and was facing a vampire one-on-one. The vampire, a young male dressed in a polo shirt and khakis, sneered at the teen as he closed in.

"Oh, you're a cute one," cooed the vampire. "The cute ones always taste good going down. Heh, heh."

"Pervert, preppy vampires," snorted Xander. "Like the normal variety wasn't creepy enough. Good thing I brought a secret weapon." Xander then pulled a squirtgun from behind her back.

"What are you going to do with--" The vampire broke off in mid-sentence and a look of realization formed on his face. "That's filled with holy water, isn't it?"

Xander grinned. "_The Lost Boys_ was on TV last week. It inspired me."

The vampire started to lunge at the teen but Xander was ready and hit the creature with a solid squirt to the eyes. The vampire howled, covered its eyes and began to flail wildly. Xander maneuvered carefully around the wounded monster waiting for just the right moment to strike. When the vampire's back was to her Xander lunged forward with all her strength and buried a stake in its back. A scream and a few seconds later the vampire was dust.

"Yeah! That rocked!" shouted Xander as she waved her weapons in triumph. "I don't know why I didn't start using one of these years ago!"

Just then the squirtgun was yanked from Xander's grip. She whipped around to see one of the earth elements standing there, the small weapon in its mighty hands. The elemental quickly closed its hand crushing the squirtgun to bits.

"Oh, now I remember why I never used one of those before," said Xander with a gulp. "Plastic weapons suck against really strong monsters."

The elemental actually seemed to smile a little bit before slamming a heavy fist into the side of Xander's head.

I hate elementals! thought Angel as he landed another blow to the earth creature's head only to see it fail to react. _That fire elemental I fought in Atlanta back in '89 almost did me in and this one seems just as tough!_

As if reading the vampire's mind the elemental, with speed defying

its bulk, lunged forward and caught Angel in a bearhug. The rogue vamp grunted as his adversary began to squeeze.

"That hurts, rock boy, but breathing's not really a priority for my kind." Angel then shifted to his game face, threw his head forward and used his fangs to tear off the elemental's crudely formed nose.

The creature only looked at the vampire completely unfazed.

"I ****really**** hate elementals," sighed Angel just before his opponent nailed him with a punishing headbutt.

A few steps away Buffy was faring better as her sword separated a vampire from its head. But before she could savor that victory a cry came from her right. The Slayer turned to see Giles struggling to rise from the floor a few feet away. His crossbow in pieces, the Englishman clutched his ribs in pain. A vampire and elemental were closing in fast. The Slayer quickly dashed to her Watcher's side.

Dammit! This fight is so not going well for the good guys! she thought as she ran.

A bit further away Skuld was thinking much the same. "Sis, hurry up with that spell already! These rock guys seem to know my hammer is magic and are hanging back but I can't keep them and the vampires away forever."

The situation did indeed look grim as the two goddesses were surrounded on all sides by the remaining three vampires and three elementals. The elder goddess did not react but kept quickly chanting in a low voice.

"Stop playing about and get them, you fools!" commanded Sydney. At their leader's orders the other two vampires charged.

But as they did Belldandy finished chanting. Immediately several feet above her head a ball of light formed. Spears of burning white light lanced out of the sphere and struck three of the remaining four vampires turning them to ash in an instant. Only Sydney, in a display of agility that would astonish even a vampire, managed to dance out of the way.

"What manner of creature are you?" demanded Belldandy as she studied the vampire.

"You shall know soon enough, my dear," replied Sydney with a slight smile. The vampire then raised her right hand and a torrent of crimson energy shot forth.

Caught flat-footed Belldandy had no chance to get out of the way and the energy hit her dead center in the chest. Angry, blazing energy engulfed the goddess like a malevolent aura and Belldandy screamed in pain. The arcane inferno faded after a few moments and the goddess fell limply to the ground.

"Sis!" cried Skuld as she began to run towards his sister. But the little goddess had let her fear for her sister override her combat instinct. She only managed a few steps before an elemental appeared

behind her and connected with an axe punch to the back of Skuld's head. The youngest goddess then too fell to the ground.

Urd was too busy squaring off against Mara to notice that her sisters had fallen. The battle was her world.

"This is great!" shouted Mara as she swung her sword again. "Good to see the stories I heard about you on the battlefield were true, Urd. It's been ages since I had this much fun in a fight to the death!"

"Dammit, Mara! It doesn't have to end this way!" countered the goddess with both words and her axe.

"Gods and demons, Urd. Of course it has to end this way. It's what we were born for."

"Not if we choose to find another way!"

Mara sighed as she swung her sword again. "You're starting to sound like your peacenik sister. Don't you get it, Urd? I want it to end this way. I always have."

"I don't believe that!" howled Urd as she brought her weapon against Mara's. "I won't believe that our friendship means nothing to you!"

The demon smiled darkly. "Believe it, bitch." Mara then spoke a short word and the runes on her sword flared to life. Urd only had time to gasp before burning red energy exploded from the sword right in her face.

The goddess fell back limply and did not move.

Only yards away Buffy again beheaded a vampire with her sword. As it turned to dusted she cartwheeled to the side avoid an attack from behind by an element. She came to her feet by Giles' side ready to continue protecting him.

"Buffy, I fear things are going very badly. You must be ready to--" Giles was cut off as red energy hit him as well. The wounded Watcher wasn't even able to cry out before he collapsed.

Battle instinct took control and Buffy turned around, forcing herself to ignore her mentor for the moment. To her left Buffy saw Sydney, her hands aglow with the red energy, standing there smiling.

"And then there was one," said the vampire.

Buffy readied herself for a fresh assault. "I'm the Slayer. One girl in all the world, you know. One of me is all I need."

"But not all your pals need," called Mara.

The Slayer hesitated and glanced at the demon. Mara stood with one foot planted on the chest of the fallen Urd, her face a mask of gleeful triumph. "Your vampire boyfriend, your formally a boy friend, your Watcher, and even the mighty Norns have fallen, Slayer. You've lost."

"If you knew me you'd know better than to say that," said Buffy as she again raised her sword into a battle stance.

"And you know not what or who you face," informed Sydney. Then Sydney's body began to glow with the crimson energy she used as her weapon. Buffy took a step back in caution and prepared herself to act on a moment's notice.

The energy flowed from Sydney's body into a ball above her head with a sound like a scream and a sluice gate being opened. Once all the energy was gone Sydney's flesh began to flow and change.

But Buffy only barely registered that. Her eyes were fixed on the glowing ball of crimson energy floating in the air. For a moment crude eyes and a mouth of lighter colored energy could be seen in the ball like some obscene jack-o-lantern. The face glared at the Slayer for a moment before the ball zipped towards the ground. There was a flash of red light and then where the ball had been stood the form of a woman.

The woman was tall, almost 5'11, with black hair that flowed down shortly past her shoulders. A golden circlet on her head and eyes of azure added a regal air to her already almost achingly beautiful features. Her clothes were a simple silk robe the color of a robin's egg tied with a short golden sash.

The woman's eyes became the focus of the Slayer's attention. There, by some sense she didn't fully understand, Buffy could see great and ancient power that belonged to an age long past.

"Aw, hell! Dammit! It's over! Oh, it's over! I free!" came a voice from nearby.

Buffy refused to take her eyes off the newcomer first. But when the woman glanced to where the voice originated the Slayer took a moment to do the same. After all, with such a major turn of events attacking now would have been foolish.

"Heyâ€|you're that punk rock vampire from the other night," said Buffy as she saw that vampire that had once been a mortal girl called Courtney. "What are you doing here?"

Instead of answering Courtney crab-walked away from the woman as fast as she could. "You stay the hell away from! I don't know how you did it but I won't let you do it again. I won't let you posses and change me again!"

"You have severed your purpose, leech," said the woman. "I will suffer your tainted presence no more."

With a simple gesture a ray of the crimson energy forked from the woman's right hand and struck the vampire. With barely enough time for a scream the vampire was reduced to ash.

The woman then looked at Buffy with a look of distain and amusement. "Do you really plan to challenge me in physical combat, child? I assure you; even a Slayer is no match for the likes of one such as I."

"I've heard that one before," retorted Buffy. "And I'm still

standing."

Just then wracking pain burned through Buffy's body. The Slayer's vision swam and she felt her legs turn to jelly. Somehow Buffy managed to use her sword as a crutch to stop herself from collapsing completely and instead only fell to one knee. Through a supreme effort of will blonde girl managed to turn her head around to where she now sensed someone behind her.

"Forgetting about someone like yours truly in the middle of a fight. That just screams rank amateur. I'm insulted," said Mara, a large smirk on her face. "Then again the lovely lady before you does tend to turn heads wherever she goes."

Buffy's vision was getting spotty and she could feel unconsciousness coming on like a chill on an autumn night. But she managed to again turn her head and look at the woman again. "Who are you?"

"You have fought valiantly, child, so I shall tell you," said the woman in a tone that sounded oddly motherly. But then a cold naked anger filled the woman's face as she prepared to speak again.

"I am Sigyn! Wife of Loki of the Aesir and goddess first class, unlimited!"

Buffy opened her mouth to speak but before she could find words Mara viciously punched her in the back of the head. The Slayer fell to the ground in a heap.

"Like I said, Slayer; you lose," said Mara, simply.

****To Be Concluded****

****Author's Notes****: Yes, I know just how long it's been since this story was last updated. I'll spare my readers more ramblings about my life. Simply put, I have a full-time job now and the energy and will to write aren't as common as they used to be.

Now let's talk story specifics.

The Oracles the Belldandy and Urd talk about are meant to be the ones we met during the first season of *Angel*. Peroth, from *Oh My Goddess!* was actually going to be the one Belldandy was going to try and get information from for a long time. But in the end I realized I hadn't read enough stories with Peroth in them to give me confidence that I could write her well.

So I looked for a substitute from the Buffyverse and eventually remembered the Oracles. Since in story time the events of the first season of *Angel* are (give or take) about six months from starting I thought it would be a nice bit of foreshadowing.

Belldandy's talk about the goddesses changing through time was a way of reconciling the *OMG* universe with actual Norse history. Again Rod M and David Tai's *Hellblazer/OMG* stories were a big influence.

More foreshadowing was intended in the conversation between Buffy and Xander. Originally the words "devoted friend" were in the conversation but I took them out because it sounded forced. But Xander hearing Buffy say the words that would literally be craved on

her tombstone in a little over two years time was really a kick to write. Somehow it just seemed to be that that part of her epitaph would have been something Xander came up with.

Buffy's line about how Xander sees things for how they really are was foreshadowing of what Caleb said to Xander just before he poked out his eye in season seven.

The sword Mara uses in her fight with Urd is meant to look like the one Paine uses in the video game _Final Fantasy X-2_. Though the runes are a bit of creative license.

We're almost at the end of this story's long road. All your questions will be answered next time. So hang in there.

10. Fury

Pain was the first thing she noticed. Xander tried to open her eyes but her vision swam and she was forced to clamp them shut again. After several long, dizzy moments Xander felt as if the world had stabilized enough to open her eyes. What she saw was not comforting.

Xander immediately noticed that she was upright with her arms chained to the rock wall she was against. The dizziness she'd felt moments before had kept Xander from realizing she'd even been standing. A quick jerk on the shackles showed they were secure.

Things got worse as Xander looked around. The goddesses and the other Scoobies were also chained to the wall. Buffy looked furious and was struggling with her own restraints to no avail. Angel was doing the same but cursing colorfully as he did so. Urd, Giles, and Belldandy were silent but each seemed deep in thought. Skuld, looking sweaty and a little tired, had apparently also been trying to free herself but was now taking a breather. Giles was chained to the wall to Xander's right and was giving the teen a familiar worried look.

"Are you all right, Xander?" asked Giles. "You took quite a nasty blow to the head. We were starting to get rather concerned."

"I feel like the floor of the gym after a basketball game but I'll live. What's going on? Where's Mara?"

"Gone for the moment but I suspect she'll return to start her ritual soon."

Giles tilted his head towards the center of the room where the large pentagram was now surrounded by five tall candelabras. A few dozen sinister-looking black candles were glowing with crimson flames. On the other side of the cavern the earth elementals stood sentry in rocky silence.

"This is looking bad," gulped Xander. "Any ideas?"

Giles shook his head. "I'm afraid not. And that's not the end of it. It seems there's been another player in all this behind the scenes until now."

"Damn if this night doesn't just keep getting better and

better."

Giles nodded. "I'd say that at least things can't get any worse but with this being Sunnydale and all it's almost certain that they can."

Just then Sigyn and Mara entered from the room that had previously been the Master's throne room.

"The appointed time is almost at hand, Mara," said Sigyn in a brisk tone. "You've done well. I am most pleased."

Mara smiled. But it was not her usual smile of sadistic pleasure. Instead it seemed to a smile of true happy satisfaction. "Thank you, Lady Sigyn. It's been a long time since you've said something like that to me. Hearing you speak like that again."

Sigyn turned to Mara and placed her right hand against the demon's cheek in a motherly fashion. "It's as if things were as they once were so very long ago," finished the goddess wistfully. "This is as it should be. For soon we shall right that ancient wrong that was done to both of us. What once was shall be again."

Mara closed her eyes and raised her right hand and placed it on Sigyn's outstretched arm. "Aye," she replied softly. "Things shall be as they once were."

Sigyn broke away from the demon and headed towards the pentagram. "Before we begin the spell let us inform our guests of the glorious event they are about to be witness to. I would see despair on their faces before we commence."

"Hey guys, the villain is going to explain her master plan to us," mocked Buffy. "Be sure to take notes. This might be on the test."

"Don't speak that way to Lady Sigyn, you little bitch!" snarled Mara, crimson energy crackling in her eyes for an instant.

Urd and Belldandy had been stunned silent since Sigyn had entered the room. It was Belldandy who found her voice first. "Sigyn, I can't believe it. It's impossible."

"I know what you mean," said Urd. "But it's her, sis. It's her. But I've never seen such a look of---"

"Hatred?" interrupted Sigyn. "It is strange for you to see such a feeling in my eyes, isn't it? Once, when things were different, hatred was unknown to me. But that was before. Now hatred is the fire that keeps me going. Seeing the looks on your faces when I present my hatred to the cosmos shall bring me great joy."

"Lady, who the heck are you?" demanded Skuld.

For a moment Sigyn actually seemed taken aback. But she quickly regained herself and again a wistful smile came to her face "Ah, sweet Skuld, I see the changes time has wrought on you have made you forget me. How sad. We were close once long ago."

"You're screwy in the head! I've never seen you before in my life!"

All that stuff with you and Loki and Baldr happened when I was too young to remember."

"So your name is Sigyn and you're mad about something. Why don't you get some therapy?" snapped the Slayer as she again jerked on her chains. "Now do you want to tell us what you're after? And I really hope it's not S&M."

"Despite your impertinence if you will be patient I shall tell you what it is I want," replied the goddess. "But first I wish you all to know how this glorious moment came to be."

Sigyn then cast a knowing gaze at Mara. "Pay attention, dear. Even you are unaware of much of what I have done to bring about this moment. From what I know of your more recent escapades a lesson on working from the shadows would seem to be in order."

Mara looked openly puzzled. "I don't understand what you mean, my lady."

The goddess only smiled vaguely. "I know. Watch and learn, young one."

"My servants, I summon you!"

There was a flash of crimson light and when it faded Wally and Zack stood a few feet from the pentagram. When they saw Sigyn the pair immediately fell to their knees.

"Mistress, how may we serve you?" asked Zack, his eyes cast respectfully at the ground.

"Whoa, what the hell!" gasped Mara who then pointed at the pair and turned to Sigyn. "They're the two humans from the bus station in L.A.! Hearing the fat one talk about Sunnydale is fat gave me the idea to come here."

His eyes still on the ground Wally grimaced at the word "fat." Beside him Zack smiled briefly to himself.

"You're coming to the Hellmouth was key to my plan, Mara," informed Sigyn. "To escape the notice of those who would try and stop me I could not contact you directly. I but could locate you and bring the idea of coming to Sunnydale to your attention. I know of your history with this place and was certain that you would need but a nudge to return here."<p>

Mara blinked a few times and then chuckled. "Cardinal rule of the trickster; make them think it was their idea. Well played, my lady."

"Like you, I learned from the very best," said Sigyn. "Now, my loyal servants, show our guests your true form and I will enlighten them as to your role in this grand scheme."

"Aye, mistress," chorused Wally and Zack before standing. Then the duo closed their eyes and whispered a word in a strange, flowing tongue. Crimson energy formed an aura around the two and then quickly faded.

While their physical frames had remained the consistent everything

else about the pair had changed. Their hair had become white and flowed well past their shoulders and their eyes were a malicious red. The pair's features had become sharper and their ears were decidedly pointy. Most striking was that their skin which was now the color of obsidian.

"SvartǼlfar!" gasped Belldandy.

"Uh, clarification?" said Buffy.

"They're elves," replied Urd. "Dark elves from the land of SvartǼlheim."

"So not the living in trees and baking cookies kind of elves I take it?" quipped Xander.

"Dammit, I am tired of that stereotype!" snapped the elf who had called himself Wally. "No, we don't make cookies or shoes or toys! The dark elves are powerful warriors, human, and don't you forget it!"

"We're actually more like the dark elves of your fantasy literature," informed the elf who had used the name Zack. "Like Drizzt Do'Urden, but, ya know, evil. Funny the sort of stuff dice-rollin' nerds can get right sometimes, isn't it?"

"Allow me to introduce Wyri and Zhat," began Sigyn. "Despite their fondness for bickering and speaking in the vernacular they are actually quite capable and unflinchingly loyal to me."

Sigyn strolled a few paces towards the goddesses and looked at them smugly. "Moving on, you goddesses doubtlessly are wondering why it is that that you cannot free yourselves from those chains."

"Don't treat us like we're stupid, Sigyn," growled Urd. "These would have to be magical chains to bind goddesses. Damn powerful ones at that. Where did you get these?"

"From the dwarves of Niðavellir, of course. It was not easy to have these chains forged in secret. But I knew powerful forces might try and stop my plan and so these chains were made so that they were strong enough to bind even a god."

Sigyn looked at the goddesses with an acidic gaze. "As I'm sure you recall that's something I am very familiar with."

"Hey, Urd, you enjoyin' learning how Prometheus felt?" taunted Mara.

"Mara, do be quite. I still have things I wish to say," chided Sigyn. "As I've told you, there are parts of this plan which I have not shared with you yet. For instance, of all the spells you can cast why did you choose a chaos burst?"

The demon quietly thought about it for a moment before shrugging. "The idea just kinda came to me. I hadn't though about the book that had the chaos burst spell in it for years. But after I decided to go to Sunnydale the idea just came to me like a bolt out of the blue."

"And do you still think that such an idea was mere chance at this point?"

"Erâ€|"

Sigyn laughed deeply and richly. "Do you recall, Mara, when you stole that bag of sleep sand from a sandman?"

The demon nodded.

"The sandman's master, Morpheus; the god of sleep, was most displeased with his carelessness and punished him severely. Not surprisingly that sandman hates you with a fiery passion. That hatred so blinded him that I was able to use it to make him my pawn.

"I sent Wyri and Zhat to him claiming to be agents of another whom you had wronged. They provided him with magical sand I made myself and told him it would influence your dreams and fill your heart hatred of your fellow demons. He was told that you would quickly be driven mad and would lash out at other demons that would eventually destroy you. He was suspicious at first, but agreed when Zhat convinced him your end would be the start of a greater gambit against demon-kind."

"That's quite a lie, my lady," said Mara with a small smirk. "But I'd have never gotten that sand from him with that sandman wasn't rather guidable."

"The best lies are the ones that are almost true, Mara," replied the goddess with a thin smile.

Confusion again grew on Mara's face. "Almost true?"

"Oh, the sand was most assuredly magic but it was not meant to drive you mad. It was to plant the idea of a chaos burst in your mind. A sandman was the perfect courier for this because even to gods and demons sandmen are but wisps of shadows."

"Like a subliminal message," said Urd. "Did you hear that, Mara! She's messing with your head!"

"Shut your cake hole, Urd!" snapped Mara.

The goddess glared at the demon. "Dammit, Mara, I'm the one on your side not her! Can't you see that you're just another pawn to her!"

Sigyn looked at Urd contemptuously as she placed a hand on Mara's shoulder. "Not a pawn, you lazy, drunken, libertine. Mara is a knight. A knight in service to her queen."

"True queens don't brainwash their knights," spat Urd.

Mara shrugged nonchalantly. "We demons don't see mind games between friends quite as negatively as you uptight celestial sorts do. Honestly, Urd, you always did take some things way too personally."

A rather vicious stream of profanity was Urd's only response.

"Putting young Urd's vulgar mouth aside I shall continue," said Sigyn. The goddess again put her hand to Mara's cheek. "You see, my dear, an idea was not the only thing concealed within the sand. When I made that sand I added a bit of my own blood to the mixture. As I expected, doing so put a little of me with within you."

"Kinky," quipped Xander. Everyone ignored her.

"Have you not noticed a change within yourself, dear Mara?" asked Sigyn. "Have you not noticed that your thinking is clearer? That your power is stronger than it has ever been? Most importantly, have you not felt the hatred you feel for those goddesses over there, the ones who betrayed you, burn hotter than ever before?"

Mara blinked in confusion. "Iâ€|I do hate them. But, my lady, Urd and her sisters have never betrayed me. I don't understand what you mean."

"It's called projecting," interrupted Buffy. "Again, I suggest therapy."

Sigyn paused for a moment to collect herself. "Despite her crude way of speaking the Slayer is correct. It was I you three betrayed. Not Mara."

"Sigyn, if you're referring to what I think you mean you must understand th--" began Belldandy.

"There's nothing to understand!" howled Sigyn, crimson energy flaring in her eyes for a moment. "You three and all the gods betrayed me! In the darkest moment of my life, I asked for one small thing and all of you turned your backs on me and left me to suffer."

"I have no idea what you're talkin' about, you freak!" retorted Skuld. "What are we supposed to have not given you anyway?"

Sigyn glared at Skuld. "Mercy," she said simply. "Because of the hate in the hearts of the gods I and those I love suffered. But tonight that suffering shall end and the cosmos shall be repaid a thousand fold for what they have done to my family."

"Please don't let this mean what I think it does," whispered Giles just loudly enough for Xander to hear.

The angry goddess turned to in the librarian's direction and smiled. "Oh, but my presence here does mean what you fear. I can see in your eyes that you've guessed. You are a smart one for a mortal man."

Sigyn strode proudly over to the front of the pentagram before turning to her captives and smiled a smile that chilled goddess and human alike. "I have waited for this night across the eons and now my heart's greatest wish shall come true! Tonight, my husband, Loki, shall be free again!"

The goddesses each gasped, Angel's scowl deepened and Giles grew visibly paler.

"Even I know that's not good," said Xander.

"Gee, you think?" mocked Angel.

"I really hate being the only clueless one here," said Buffy. "A little 411 please!"

Sigyn chuckled to herself. "Do enlighten your charge, Watcher. It won't do for one of you to be witness to this moment and not fully understand its magnitude."

Giles turned to Buff and began to speak quickly. "Loki is the Norse god of trickery and husband of Sigyn. Loki grew jealous of his brother Baldr, god of innocence, beauty, joy, purity, and peace, and arranged his death. As punishment the other gods bound Loki to three slabs of stone, placed a serpent over his head so that its venom would drip onto him. Sigyn chose to stay by her husband's side and collected the venom in a wooden bowl. But eventually she would have to empty the bowl when it fills up. When that happens the searing venom drips onto Loki's face. The pain from this is said to be so terrible that his writhing creates earthquakes.

"It is also said that one day Loki will break free of his bonds. He will then lead an army of frost giants against the gods of Asgard in a war called Ragnarök that will eventually bring an end to the entire universe."

"Wait!" said Urd. "If you're here who's tending to Loki? If that venom was hitting his face there should be quakes the world over right now."

"I recruited Angrboda to handle that for the moment," informed Sigyn.

Buffy, Angel, and Xander looked at Giles. "Angrboda is Loki's mistress," he clarified.

"So the guy's a cheater? Doesn't really sound like the sorta guy enduring centuries of misery would be worth for," teased Buffy as she looked at their captor.

"You do not understand the ways of the mighty," replied Sigyn, icily. "He is a god. His is one of the Aesir. He is to be allowed his alliances."

"The earthquakes that have been happening in Sunnydale recently. That wasn't just nature. That was Loki!" accused Angel.

Sigyn chuckled as she turned to regard the vampire. "My, my, the leech has more than fangs in its head. Yes, my husband knows he will soon be free. He struggles with all his strength to be free as he is not done in so very long. The small tremors you have felt are nothing to the wrath that burns within him. Once he is free the gods and this realm of yours shall pay for his suffering."

"I get why you're mad at the gods but what did we ever do to you?" yelled Xander.

"Personally, you mortals did nothing to me, little girl," mocked Sigyn. "But the gods care for this world and you mortals. That is reason enough to bring chaos and ruin to it."

"So everyone has to suffer just because the gods punished your murderer husband and you didn't have the good sense to leave him," said Buffy, hotly. "Talk about a selfish motive."

"Oh, but that is not all they did to me," hissed Sigyn. "They took I and Loki's sons, dear Narfi and Vǫli, turned them into wolves, and set them upon each other. Vǫli tore his own brother to pieces!"

The enraged goddess glared at Urd and Belldandy. "They turned my children, my innocent children, into beasts and watched as one slaughtered the other! They condemned me to watch my husband bound in chains and endure pain so awful it would make a god scream!

"At Loki's trial I cried and begged for mercy for my family. But not one god or goddess would say a word in our name. No one spoke when Odin declared that not only must Loki be punished but his sons as well! But oh how they gathered to watch and cheer as the sons of Loki rended each other to ribbons.

"Not even you three, who I loved as if you were my own, would speak for me," Sigyn continued, her gaze shifting from goddess to goddess as she spoke. "Of all the gods and goddesses in Asgard I thought surely you three would stand by me. But you betrayed me just as all the other gods did!"

Silence loomed heavy in the room as the goddesses looked at each other and the vampire, the Slayer and the ordinary human looked on.

It was Urd who spoke first. "It was a different world then, Sigyn, you know that. Justice had to be hard and brutal because that's what the universe was. We cared for you as much as you did for us. But Baldr's death was like a dagger in the heart of all of the Golden Realm. Even after all this time I've still never felt such despair. Baldr was the light of Asgard."

"Do you think we weren't hurt by what happened?" said Belldandy. "Do you think that we didn't care about Narfi and Vǫli? Do you think our hearts didn't break when you chose to stand beside Loki and try and spare him some of his pain even knowing that meant you'd have to leave Asgard, and us, until Ragnarǫk? Because, I swear to you, we were suffering too."

At her sister's words Urd's face grew adamant. "What Belldandy says is true. But that didn't change the fact that Loki had to be punished. He had to be punished no matter what."

Sigyn strode to the Norn and leaned in until their faces were just inches apart. "Even if that price was my family?"

Urd did not blink. "Yes. Even if that was the price."

Sigyn stared long and hard at Urd for a time. Eventually she stepped back and crossed her arms. "It seems I was mistaken. The Urd of old is still within you. The drunken buffoon has not replaced the warrior and daughter of the Golden Realm."

"I'm goddess of the Past," said Urd, coldly. "I invented old school. Let me out of these chains and I'll show you Urd the warrior."

"I've seen Urd the warrior and was not impressed. Or have you forgotten that it you who are now in chains?" retorted Sigyn.

Sigyn then turned to Mara. "Enough with this storytelling. My tale has been told and now it is time to begin the ritual."

Mara nodded and moved to stand on one side of the pentagram while Sigyn positioned herself on the other. They raised their hands high in the air and began to chant quickly in a brusque tongue older than any ever spoken by mortals. Crimson energy flowed from the top of the pentagram which immediately flowed through the lines of the symbol, the energy blazing and cracking like fire. As the chanting continued the same energy haloed Sigyn and Mara's hands and glowed in their eyes.

The dark elves fell to their knees and prostrated themselves in the direction of the pentagram and the elementals looked on as silent as ever.

Suddenly, with the brightest flash of light yet and roar like a tornado, the ground under the pentagram vanished leaving only an inky black hole.

"I so do not want to see the white rabbit that would come out of that hole," gulped Xander.

"Now is not the time for jokes!" chided Giles.

"It's either jokes or I wet myself."

"Then by all means continue."

"This is looking bad," said Angel. "Buffy, if we don't get out of this, I need to say--"

"Don't go there," interrupted the Slayer. "We've said goodbye enough. And we're not going down this easy." Buffy then began to pull on her chains again.

"Any ideas?" asked Urd to her sisters. "Because I'm fresh out."

"Oh, if I was loose I'd teach Mara and that nutjob a lesson!" huffed Skuld.

"I'm afraid we can only trust in the Almighty to provide a way to stop this," said Belldandy. "Faith is our only weapon now."

From somewhere deep within the pit came a howl of rage and pain. Then there was the sound of clanking chains.

Sigyn and Mara stopped their chanting and gazed at the pit. "My husband stirs! Already the chaos we shall soon bring forth loosens his bonds!"

"Sigyn?" came a deep, horse voice from the pit.

"Master?" whispered Mara.

"It ****is**** Loki!" gasped Belldandy.

"Aw, damn, is this bad!" gulped Urd.

"My husband!" cried Sigyn. "We have woven the spell. We need only wait for the power of the chaos burst to gather. Once it is released you will be free again!"

"My beloved, I knew you would free me! Hurry so that I might be free again! Hurry so that I can exact my revenge! Hurry that I might bring Ragnar  k to this unjust universe!"

"Yes!" replied Sigyn. "Only after the cleansing fire has wiped this tainted creation of an existence away can a new and better world be born! It is time to fulfill your destiny, my love! Be the spark that starts the fire which burns away everything!"

"Did he say Ragnar  k?" said Skuld, her voice strong with panic. "That's the end of the whole universe!"

"No, it can't be! Now is not the time for Ragnar  k!" cried Belldandy.

"In Sunnydale it's always time for an apocalypse," quipped Buffy as she continued to pull at her chains. "It's kinda like jell-o that way."

"Mara, can't you see they're both insane!" shouted Urd. "It's too soon for Ragnar  k! You know this! You can't want this!"

Sigyn fixed her gaze on Mara. "Did you not swear to Loki, your teacher who treated you as a daughter, that you would fight at his side come Ragnar  k? Do you not want revenge on those in Asgard who always looked down on you because you were born a demon? Do you not feel the call of chaos and destruction in your very blood?"

"I do," began Mara, hesitantly. "But, my lady, you never said  now is not meant to be the time for Ragnar  k! To begin Ragnar  k too soon would mean the end of all things. There would be no world of any kind once the old one was swept away!"

"Lies!" retorted Sigyn. "Lies told by cowardly and corrupt gods who feared the better world my husband was prophesied to bring about when the universe was still young!"

"She speaks true, Mara!" called Loki as the sound of chains grew stronger. "Stand by my side once more. Let us show existence chaos it has never known before it dies!"

"You know that that if Ragnar  k starts too soon it'll mean nothing but oblivion for gods and demons alike!" cried Urd. "You have to decide, Mara! What you chose to do right now will decide the fate of the entire universe! You have to choose right now!"

The demon looked at her onetime friend chained to a wall, desperation filling her eyes. She looked at Sigyn who was gazing at her with mania in her eyes. In the pit below Loki bellowed again and the sound of chains grew stronger still.

Mara gulped.

****To be continuedâ€|****

Author's Notes: Yes, I know it's been an age since I updated. This chapter, even though it's short, proved to be a real struggle for me. I ran into some plot problems I hadn't expected, had to do some more research to make sure the Norse mythology was correct, and tinker with the dialogue quite a bit.

Even though I love to write exposition this chapter had more of it than any other in this story. I had to lay everything out here and that also proved a challenge. Hopefully I managed to make all the threads from the previous chapters tie together.

When I first read the myth of Sigyn I knew there was a potential story there. But I was already well into plotting this story when I got the idea to incorporate Sigyn into the mix. I had to have some believable reason for why Mara was suddenly so formidable and an outside influence like and pissed off goddess seemed just the ticket.

Yeah, it meant breaking from the timeline and not having Glory be the first goddess the Scoobies would have to fight. But I can live with a slight change in the Buffy timeline for the sake of a story.

I'm sure the revelation about the true nature of Wally and Zack was a surprise. But if you look back over the story you'll notice that, except when they're tricking Mara, they never refer to each other by those names. The dark elves in fantasy worlds are loosely based on the ones from Norse mythology and I thought it would be to use them and have them be like the dark elves of fiction.

Drizzt Do'Urden is the most popular of the fictional dark elves and hails from the Forgotten Realms universe. I strongly recommend the story where Drizzt is introduced, "The Dark Elf Trilogy". Anyone who likes fantasy should really enjoy it.

Anyway, after all that talk it'll be time for big action in the next chapter. It will be out whenever I finish writing it and not before.

End
file.